EDITED BY

DOMINIC
BROOMFIELD-McHUGH

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# The Oxford Handbook *of* THE HOLLYWOOD MUSICAL

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

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*Edited by*

DOMINIC BROOMFIELD-MCHUGH

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In memory of
Jane Feuer (1951–2021),
one of the founders of scholarship
on the Hollywood musical

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Dominic Broomfield-McHugh
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September 2021

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# About the Companion Website

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Oxford has created a website to accompany *The Oxford Handbook of the Hollywood Musical*. Material that cannot be made available in a book is provided here. We encourage you to consult this resource in conjunction with the chapters. Examples available online are indicated in the text with Oxford's symbol ▶.

# THE HOLLYWOOD MUSICAL AND THE CRITICAL LENS

## *An Introduction*

DOMINIC BROOMFIELD-MCHUGH

It is a curiosity of the study of the Hollywood musical that while film scholars have long seen it as a rewarding site of discovery, musicologists have mostly not. This is even more striking given the exponential growth of musicological scholarship on the North American stage musical and the interdependence of the stage and screen models. In turn, it is also noticeable that while "musical theater studies" has now emerged as a kind of independent area of study—almost a discipline in itself, with numerous degree programs and a dedicated journal, *Studies in Musical Theatre*—there is no equivalent ring-fenced area of activity for the film equivalent. It is true that papers and articles on the Hollywood musical appear at a range of conferences and in various journals, and one could hardly claim that the genre has been neglected. But given that the film musical is currently at its most prolific and popular point in over fifty years, it is strange that it has not enjoyed the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary attention given to the Broadway musical since the new millennium.

As a musicologist who has worked extensively on the stage musical, I'm struck by how—with some distinguished exceptions—musicology has been relatively slow to embrace almost a century of English-language musical film when our discipline was so crucial to the birth of the study of the Broadway musical in the academy. That impressive work was largely done by film scholars such as Jane Feuer (*The Hollywood Musical*), Rick Altman (*The American Film Musical*), and Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans (*Blue Skies and Silver Linings*) in the 1980s, and followed up by many others in the years since, though there have been relatively few general studies of the genre since those days. When I started to teach an undergraduate module on the Hollywood musical in 2011, it was incredibly liberating in many ways to have to set readings from a different, rich disciplinary perspective, recognizing a similar lack of sustained commentary that musicologists such as Geoffrey Block, Kim Kowalke, Stephen Banfield, and Joseph

P. Swain encountered when they first contributed the musicology of the Broadway musical back in the 1980s and early 1990s.

A further strand of reading also informed my initial foray into teaching film musicals to “Music” students, namely the non-academic trade books that provided useful production and biographical information about some of the films I wanted to teach. I was particularly struck, for example, by how well Hugh Fordin’s *The World of Entertainment!* (originally published in the 1970s) brought to life the atmosphere of the Arthur Freed unit at MGM, an indispensable place to start when understanding where films such as *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *Singin’ in the Rain* might have been coming from. Unlike some of the more theoretical writings from film studies that focused mainly on “reading” the movies, Fordin’s book also benefited from both archival research and interviews that illuminated the behind-the-scenes process in ways that were familiar from musicological approaches to the stage musical. However, the lack of scholarly apparatus of any kind—citations, footnotes, even an index—means that the book raises as many questions as it answers, because it can be difficult to cross-reference or check some of the facts.

In editing *The Oxford Handbook of the Hollywood Musical* (which I conceived as a companion volume to my earlier *Oxford Handbook of Musical Theatre Screen Adaptations*), I wanted to bring together useful elements from all these perspectives in order to try to summarize where we are and where we might go with studying this culturally ubiquitous genre together. Having different disciplinary approaches means that we can all learn from one another rather than territorially endorsing only one, and in these pages the reader will find a range of theoretical and historical frames for this beloved but sometimes controversial group of films. To do so, it addresses many aspects of the how, when, and why of the Hollywood musical, ranging in date from enduring early sound films such as *42nd Street* (1933) through to more recent contributions like *The Greatest Showman* (2017). It is a handbook rather than an encyclopedia so it aims to provide and provoke ideas rather than providing a comprehensive history, but the volume addresses major figures from the classical Hollywood period such as Fred Astaire, Judy Garland, and Lena Horne; examines family favorites like *Mary Poppins* (1964); and finds rich discussion in renaissance-era musicals such as *La La Land* (2016).

The book is organized into sections that explore themes, ideas, or problems. Part I addresses the conventions of breaking into song and dance, the eccentric dimension that defines the musical either positively or negatively depending on whether it thrills or alienates the individual viewer. Lloyd Whitesell examines the thresholds between song and non-song in a wide range of films, while Dominic Symonds offers a reading of how a particular performer (Judy Garland) uses musicality as an expressive tool beyond the songs themselves. Chapters by Kara Gardner and Todd Decker, on dreams and widescreen technology, offer complementary analyses of how dance and dancers work with cameras and audiences in the Hollywood musical. These chapters help to lay out some of the peculiarities of the genre—the questions that continue to amuse, confuse, and fascinate.

For a genre often associated with joy, the musical has also been the cause of considerable violence for some audiences by reinforcing discriminatory tropes that have reinforced hierarchies or pejorative tropes through racism and/or xenophobia. Just as *Singin' in the Rain* evokes naive joy, it also invokes the world of blackface in its references to *The Jazz Singer*, and Donald O'Connor briefly performs a parody of a Jolsonesque "mammy" song.[1] The *Handbook*'s second part addresses this topic through case studies of individuals like Lena Horne (Hannah Robbins), through analyses of specific communities (Desirée J. Garcia on Latin performers; William Everett on portrayals of immigrants), or through particular elements of production (gender and voice in Disney—Colleen Montgomery; European translations of Hollywood musicals—Olaf Jubin). While such a section can never be comprehensive, it serves as a reminder that some communities struggle to access the pleasure that others receive from watching certain musicals, or experience them in particular ways.

In Part III, five scholars offer case studies of the production of specific films. Tim Carter and Geoffrey Block each approach a celebrated movie from the 1930s, *42nd Street* (1933) and *A Damsel in Distress* (1937), respectively, while Andrew Buchman uses archival sources to shine new light on the writing of *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). Megan Woller's chapter looks at how casting affected the making of *Mary Poppins*, and Cliff Eisen offers a contrasting reading of *Night and Day*, the Cole Porter biopic, to show the conflicting priorities when putting "real" lives on the musical screen.

Part IV of the book shifts more explicitly to the theme of stars and how they shape the material as we experience it on film. Nathan Platte's insightful chapter on Oscar Levant offers a compelling reading of this unusual performer's contributions to the film musical, with contrasting accounts by Raymond Knapp and Steven Cohan of how MGM's creative teams handled aspects of the careers of Judy Garland and Esther Williams. Julie Lobalzo Wright looks at the mythology of stardom itself in the *A Star Is Born* films, while my own chapter uses archival sources to show how *The Barkleys of Broadway* was originally written in a particular way to accommodate Garland, causing problems when it was only partly revised after Ginger Rogers took over her role. Most of those chapters are focused on the studio system and the classical period of Hollywood history. Part V looks at what happened next. Martha Shearer's chapter on *Xanadu* and Katy Jayasuriya's on *The Little Prince* examine how a change in era and production modes left the musical all at sea after forty years of near-continuous success, while Paul R. Laird offers insights into the unusual Barbra Streisand musical *Yentl*.

If the Hollywood musical never exactly left us, there was certainly a period in the 1980s and 1990s when studios and producers showed limited faith in it as a viable commercial genre; it is a striking example of how times have changed that Steven Spielberg, whose sci-fi action movies and dramas dominated that period, turned only in 2021 to the musical with a late-career remake of *West Side Story* (2021).[2] In the final section of the book, four scholars examine the musical's return to grace in a different production environment with films such as *Moulin Rouge!* (Robynn J. Stilwell), *La La Land* (Hannah Lewis), and *The Greatest Showman* (James Leve), plus a chapter on the relationship between the Broadway, Hollywood, and television musical by Jane Feuer. Feuer's death during the latter stages of producing this book robbed us of both a supportive colleague and one of the founders of scholarship on the musical film. It is an honor to dedicate this book to her.

## NOTES

1. As Michael Rogin notes, "But whereas *The Jazz Singer* displayed the black face of popular culture, *Singin' in the Rain* buries it." Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 206.
2. That Spielberg has always valued the musical is obvious, of course, from the "Anything Goes" opening of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*.

# PART I

# THE CONVENTIONS OF BREAKING INTO SONG AND DANCE

# CHAPTER 1

# EXPRESSIVE THRESHOLDS AND ANOMALOUS UTTERANCES

LLOYD WHITESELL

## SHIFTING MODES

IN many people's minds, the film musical is defined by its giddy segues into stylized performance. As Graham Wood observes: "bursting into song on screen is both the delight and difficulty of the screen musical genre."[1] For its detractors, this convention is a sign of weakness, betraying tendencies toward escapism, unbridled sentimentality, and decorative form, all of which go against deep-seated codes of masculine behavior. Even so, plenty of people are drawn to that pattern of "bursting" into a new expressive mode, finding resonance in the rhetoric of spontaneity, rupture, and transformation.

In his groundbreaking genre study, Rick Altman offered a framework for understanding this stylistic trait that would prove influential. Positing a conceptual distinction between the "diegetic [audio] track, bearer of realistic sounds" (including diegetic music) and "the music track, bearer of an instrumental accompaniment," he grants that distinction symbolic potency, connoting a fundamental opposition in poetic register (ordinary vs. romantic) if not modes of being (real vs. ideal). This allows him to illustrate the characteristic dramatic effects made possible when characters pass from one track or mode to another. Finally, having defined the perceptual field in binary terms, he celebrates the ambiguous between-space the musical seems to inhabit:

> In the non-musical film the music and diegetic tracks remain entirely separate; in the musical film there is a constant crossing-over. . . . This intermixing is at the very heart of the style characteristic of the American film musical. By breaking down the barrier separating the two tracks, the musical blurs the borders between the real and the ideal.[2]

It's tempting to map Altman's schema onto the distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic sound in film, the former issuing from a source within the story world, the latter given voice outside in a narratorial space. But as James Buhler and David Neumeyer caution, such terms apply poorly to the musical genre: "Musicals do not maintain the clear separation of diegetic and nondiegetic registers and so cannot define the boundaries of the diegetic world, which seems to constantly dissolve under the force of song."[3] When a singing character is supported by an invisible orchestra, to maintain (according to the "diegetic/nondiegetic" distinction) that the voice belongs to the story world while the accompaniment does not, this contradicts our sense of an indivisible utterance. Polarized terminology is inadequate to describe how the story world behaves.

Altman suggests the term "audio dissolve" to describe the transition between modes, the moment when the boundaries seem to blur.[4] Erin Brannigan treats the analogous moment in dance musicals as a "gestural anacrusis": "the space where the shift occurs between walking and dancing, utilitarian movements and choreography, between recognizable behavior and dance-like deviations."[5] Raymond Knapp speaks of a move from naturalism into a "Musically Enhanced Reality Mode."[6] Whatever we call it, the crucial experience is that of a threshold between an everyday expressive realm and one that obeys musical impulses.[7]

The story worlds of musicals harbor an element of fantasy encouraging such threshold effects, which may feel natural and expected in some instances, surprising and magical in others. Often a preliminary scene of musicalization cues spectators as to the enhanced expressivity of the world they are entering. Mother and son in *The King and I* (1956) whistle a happy tune to quell their nerves. In *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), members of the Smith family each warble the same earworm, regardless of their separation in space. The traveling salesmen in *The Music Man* (1962) fall into metric speech patterns, catching the rhythm of their train. The denizens of the Paris neighborhood in *Love Me Tonight* (1932) compose a contrapuntal ensemble out of the sounds of their early morning activities. Such stagecraft naturalizes the characters' music-making while musically animating their environment, thus weakening the distinction between the familiar and the fantastic and preparing the viewer for deeper submersion in the latter. There is an effect used sparingly in non-musical films where a musical performance, clearly diegetic, is enhanced or "sweetened" by instruments with no basis in the fictional world—where reality bends to stylization.[8] In musical films, the depicted sound world is prone to enhancement at any moment.

In its representational discourse, the genre mingles principles of storytelling with principles of euphony, that is, sonic patterning and lyricism for its own sake.[9] In affective terms, such increased musicalization (or sweetening of the sound design) enhances pleasure and encourages play—another pretext for stigmatizing the genre as lightweight. Yet in critical practice, shifts in performative register are read seriously as providing access to a state of existence that is charmed or privileged in some way: emotionally transparent, socially utopian, closer to metaphysical truth. Altman demonstrates how high the stakes can be when he appraises such a mode-shift in an Elvis Presley film (*Blue Hawaii*, 1961):

> Soon . . . the tinny Middle-European sound of the music box disappears entirely as a large chorus is added to the orchestra. Imperceptibly we have slid away from a backyard barbecue in Hawaii to a realm beyond language, beyond space, beyond time. With the disappearance of the music box sound we have moved into a world of pure music, divorced from this or any other specific plot. We have reached a "place" of transcendence where time stands still, where contingent concerns are stripped away to reveal the essence of things.[10]

Drawing on Romantic notions of immaterial transcendence, universal spirit, and supranormal perception, Altman treats the shift as a passage between secular and enchanted worlds. Likewise, D. A. Miller and David Halperin endorse the genre's fantastic element as a lifeline for marginalized subjects:

> In its shameless celebration of an alternate reality . . . where normal people (even major-league baseball teams) unexpectedly burst into song and dance, the lyrical ethos of the Broadway musical—its interruptive, reality-suspending, mode-shifting form—[speaks] eloquently to the sense of difference, the desire to escape, and the will to imagine alternatives . . . that remain important parts of queer childhood experience to this day.[11]

Not all shifts feel equally momentous, and many of them allow for a range of interpretive response. We might accept a move into song and dance as no more than a heightening of style, a temporary expansion of resources to represent people and phenomena that retain the same character throughout. But even innocent-seeming shifts in style have the power to transform meaning by suggesting thresholds between different perceptual states. Take the scene in *An American in Paris* (1951) where Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron are courting on the banks of the Seine. No background music accompanies their opening dialogue; the first music we hear is Kelly humming a tune ("Our Love Is Here to Stay"). After a few verbal exchanges, Caron picks up a bit of the tune herself. Once Kelly's advances become heated, he begins the song in earnest, with the orchestra entering to support him. In the first chorus of the song he serenades her (with no extraneous stylized gestures), after which they dance together through the second chorus. The scene thus contains two distinct shifts in expressive mode: one musical (from speech to accompanied song) and one gestural (from sitting and walking to choreography). The snatches of spontaneous singing in advance of the number affirm a continuum between the naturalized and musicalized aspects of the filmic world, making it possible to understand the shifts as seamless moves into stylization with no effect on the status of represented reality. On the other hand, the strong contrasts between dry dialogue and lush orchestral song, bodies in casual repose and disciplined balletic pairing, reinforce the sense of crossing over into a different state of being. The expressive threshold implies an existential threshold.

Such effects follow from the musical's recurring transitions between realism and stylization, suggesting either fluid experience within an enhanced world, or special moments of access between zones of reality and fantasy.[12] But shifting between expressive modes is not the only way the film musical juxtaposes realism and stylization. Another area where this comes into play is the scene of utterance—how musical numbers dramatize personal interaction and communicative address. In general terms, I propose that scenes of musical utterance can be classified as either *lyric* (for oneself, with no intended listener), *presentational* (a show for the entertainment of a diegetic audience), or *participatory* (expressing a social exchange, such as a conversation, dance lesson, fight, lullaby, labor union rally, graduation ceremony, or crap game). *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) features all three categories: for example, lyric address in the title solo, presentational address in the vaudeville act ("Fit as a Fiddle") and floor show ("All I Do Is Dream of You"), and participatory address in the cheerful horseplay of "Good Morning." Within each category, individual scenes and scene-types can either heed or suspend realism. While a great many numbers stage situations familiar from the real world, some types of utterance have no real-life models. Audiences habituated to the stylized address may not notice the anomaly.

## SOLILOQUY

To start with, lyric address (speaking to oneself) is not all that common in everyday life. Yet viewers accept soliloquies, scenes of solitary vocalization, even when unrealistic. No doubt they have absorbed a long history of spoken monologues in the theater that sidestep mimetic principles. "Singin' in the Rain" falls on the realistic end of the spectrum: intense happiness could cause anyone to break into song and dance in odd places (especially someone who dances for a living). The address in "The Boy Next Door" (*Meet Me in St. Louis*, 1944) follows a more stylized convention. Finding herself alone, Esther Smith (Judy Garland) soliloquizes unrequited feelings for her neighbor, turning inner thoughts and emotions into words. On the weird end of the spectrum would be a number like "The Superstition Song" from *Lucky Me* (1954), which introduces us to the character of Candy Williams (Doris Day). On a sunny day in Miami, Candy bounces down a busy street, catching herself just before walking under a ladder. Turning to onlookers, she launches into a vigorous explanation of her personal code: while she denies being superstitious, she sees no harm in using good luck tokens such as horseshoes and rabbits' feet, and always avoids risky behavior such as stepping on cracks, picking up rusty pins, eating oysters in the wrong month, etc. The thing is, she keeps moving down the street as she sings, so that what started as a conversation quickly turns into a soliloquy. Proceeding with an energetic, exaggeratedly buoyant gait, she presents a strange spectacle, explaining herself at length to no one in particular while receiving odd glances from the folks she passes by. In its content, this opening number is a typical "I am" song, establishing Candy's personality. But the extraordinary form of address (speaking to oneself in a crowded public place) not only differentiates her as comically off-kilter—a screwball—but suspends realism through its superfluous utterance.[13]

## Group Expression

Film musicals feature an array of stylized utterance types whose strangeness has yet to be articulated.[14] One such type involves a group of people expressing a single idea or sentiment. This can occur in a presentational context (a show for a fictional audience) with no cognitive dissonance, since performance attractions are expected to treat their expressive forms with artifice. It's nothing out of the ordinary for an amateur group like the Von Trapp Family Singers to harmonize on a shared text, or for hired performers to leap out of a cake and sing "All I Do Is Dream of You" in ensemble (*Singin' in the Rain*).

However, when group expression occurs in a participatory context, realism can falter and mutate. Again, examples fall along a spectrum. Formal occasions like graduation ceremonies ("You'll Never Walk Alone," *Carousel*, 1956), church services ("Li'l Black Sheep," *Cabin in the Sky*, 1943), and welcome celebrations (the Munchkinland sequence, *The Wizard of Oz*, 1939) provide realistic motivation for communal singing. But what's going on in the wedding scene in *The Sound of Music* (1965), when the nuns sing wildly inappropriate lyrics ("How do you solve a problem like Maria?") in counterpoint with the processional music? They can't "really" be speaking such things out loud. This must be the stylized representation of a collective thought, a modern cousin of the Greek chorus.[15] Impromptu entertainments are also natural contexts for communal utterance. Farewell parties ("Bye Bye Baby," *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, 1953), carnivals and fairs ("We Go Together," *Grease*, 1978), outings in the park ("Let's Go Fly a Kite," *Mary Poppins*, 1964), and the like are plausible settings for the expression of mutual high spirits. However, though the setting may be realistic, the manner of performance often diverges pleasurably into hyper-coordination and extravagant choreography. And things can always take a strange turn. In *Fame* (1980), when Bruno's father sets up speakers on his taxicab and blasts his son's music ("Fame"), the students from the school for the arts pour out onto the street, halting traffic. Their impromptu dance jam expresses youthful exuberance, creative spark, and a dream to make it big. But unlike most scenes of group expression, in which music unites the community and fills the available space, here the musicalized students and the real-world motorists don't mix. The young people's disruptive performance fails to charm their preoccupied neighbors, and the (incompletely) stylized nature of their movements shows up starkly against the drab surroundings.

The classic "Trolley Song" from *Meet Me in St. Louis* is a surprisingly anomalous scene of group expression. Here, a sightseeing trip to the fairgrounds inspires an impromptu sing-along. But aside from the context of communal entertainment, almost nothing about this utterance is realistic. Instead of joining in a well-known traditional tune or giving voice to spontaneous emotions, the passengers offer a cameo (making it up on the spot?) about a trolley ride in an unspecified past, memorable as the setting for romance. References to landmarks (e.g., Huntington Dell) imply actual home territory, but in fact all such place-names are invented. Some of the lyrics match the present action ("The day was bright"), while others don't ("I tried to sing but couldn't squeak"). At a key moment, the focus switches from chorus to solo. Until this point, the lovestruck Esther (Judy Garland) has refrained from singing with the group, but the sight of her beau catching up to the trolley moves her to take over the narrative. As soon as she enters, the lyrics about zinging heartstrings make more sense, as if the passengers' chorus, lacking its own psychology, has been prefiguring hers all along. On the other hand, she assumes an artificial narrating persona, whose fancy apparel ("high starched collar") and hairstyle ("piled high upon my head") bear no relation to her actual appearance.[16] This distancing device gives her the chance to air her true feelings without ever acknowledging them as her own. All in all, "The Trolley Song" represents a highly contrived form of utterance, abandoning naturalism in order to spectacularize the star, advance the love plot, and embed an additional layer of nostalgic framing into the action.

Some numbers don't even bother with a realistic pretext. In "Iowa Stubborn" (*The Music Man*), a crowd of people speak as one to the newcomer in town, informing him that they're an unsociable lot. By no means a conversation, the song functions as a calling card, a conventional act of group self-characterization that would never occur in real life. In "Ascot Gavotte" (*My Fair Lady*, 1964), the society types attending the horse races are not talking among themselves or to anyone else. They simply verbalize as a chorus, providing a moment-by-moment account of the action and expressing a general excitement (contradicted by their mechanical delivery and frozen poses). In "Jolly Holiday" (*Mary Poppins*), the storyline pauses to allow a group of devotees (in this case, barnyard animals) to sing the praises of the female lead. In "Another Day of Sun," the opening number of *La La Land* (2016), young people in a traffic jam get out of their cars to tell personal tales of Hollywood hopefulness, leading to a synchronized song-and-dance on the stalled overpass. In contrast to most group numbers, in which the chorus of performers represents a social body—a school class, a sports team, a meeting of farmers and cowpokes—here no such collectivity exists. Pre-routine, the Angelenos are unknown to each other, housed in separate vehicles, listening to incompatible soundtracks and going nowhere all by themselves. But crossing the expressive threshold, they discover a common set of aspirations and struggles: every one of them, it turns out, is "reaching for the heights." They shift out of realism into a utopian utterance demonstrating a fellowship of the spirit. The vision of unity provides comfort while the musical fancy lasts, after which we return to alienated reality.

As we can see, the film musical has more than one way to approach scenes of collective song or dance: adhering to realistic expectations; supplying alibis for a surreptitious transition into stylized behavior; or setting the imagination free, at least for the interval.

## SPEECHIFYING

Sometimes a featured character will address a group of people in an extended, one-way act of communication. In real life, this happens when someone gives a speech (Mrs. Banks rallying her servants to the feminist cause in "Sister Suffragette" from *Mary Poppins*; Nathan Detroit toasting his impending wedding in "Adelaide," *Guys and Dolls*, 1955), offers personal testimony (Nicely-Nicely at the prayer meeting in "Sit Down You're Rockin' the Boat," *Guys and Dolls*), or presents a sales pitch (Harold Hill duping the townspeople in "Ya Got Trouble," *The Music Man*). Though such utterance is unidirectional, those addressed often express their close attention and agreement by echoing the speaker's phrases, as my examples illustrate. The Cowardly Lion's speech in the Emerald City, "If I Were King of the Forest" (*Wizard of Oz*), represents a happy convergence of realism and stylization. As Dorothy and her companions anticipate their audience with the Wizard, the Lion takes the opportunity to hold forth about his future status. It makes plot-sense for the character to dwell at length on his desire to be king and to hog the stage while doing so, adopting a histrionic manner, playfully putting on airs, improvising choreography and costume.

Some scenes of this type, however, display a discursiveness that surpasses or ignores realistic motivation. Early in the film *Summer Stock* (1950), an overalls-clad Jane (Judy Garland) drives through the local farmland on her tractor, saying howdy to her neighbors and wishing them "Happy Harvest." This feels at first like a natural, two-way speech situation, since people call "howdy neighbor" in return. But Jane never stops talking, even when people are too far away to hear, and between greetings her remarks take on an over-the-top quality, mixing benedictions, exhortations ("get your rocking chairs for all your cares are over"), utopian visions, and folksy words of wisdom ("when you work for Mother Nature you get paid by Father Time"). In fact, the majority of her utterance is unilateral in a way that pulls us out of the realistic illusion, making Jane seem less like a farmworker among friends than a stylized icon of fertility spreading her good will.[17]

A similar shift from natural to iconic utterance occurs in *Hair* (1979), when the itinerant group of hippies crashes Sheila's patrician dinner party. The hippies' leader Berger (Treat Williams) taps his water glass to get everyone's attention and pleads his case to the assembled guests: their friend Claude has fallen in love with Sheila and wants to see her before leaving to fight in Vietnam. Sheila's mother exclaims, "You have a hell of a nerve," upon which Berger begins a solo number ("I Got Life") in which he lists everything he has (hair, head, brains, ears . . .), in a kind of nursery rhyme or absurdist manifesto, while stepping up onto the formal dinner table to take it over as a dance platform. The violation of realism is abrupt, a sharp switch from dramatically motivated speech to hyper-stylized speechifying, transforming Berger from a character in a story into an archetypal embodiment of vitality, charisma, and freedom.

At a different party, mad scientist Frank N. Furter (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, 1975) sings a speechifying number to his own assembled guests ("I Can Make You a Man"). Having successfully unveiled his new laboratory experiment, Rocky, he indulges in some boasting about his creative powers. But this semantic kernel is approached so indirectly (via a parodically eroticized description of exercise regimens) and couched in such artifice in the punning refrain (both "I can turn you into a hunk" and "I can assemble a hunk for you") that the verbal cleverness and elaborate innuendo become the real point of the utterance. Finally, Fred Astaire performs a one-sided utterance ("A Shine on Your Shoes") with no realistic motivation whatever in *The Band Wagon* (1953). After wandering through an arcade, trying out various novelty games, he comes upon a man shining shoes. Out of the blue, he illogically addresses this man (as onlookers mill about), stating in essence: "a shoe shine is the best way to lift your spirits." His bubble-headed dictum takes flight in an extended passage of "happy-go-lucky" footwork and verbal dexterity, eventually dissolving into percussive phonetic patterns ("Shiny shoes! Shiny shoes! Shiny shoes! . . . Shine shine shine on my shoes. . . . Got a shoe shine, got a shoe shine, got a shoe shine")—sense yielding to style and spectacle. This talkative number exists purely for pleasure and shrugs off any responsibility to the filmic narrative.

## AMBIENT VOICES

The film *Easter Parade* (1948) begins with a number ("Happy Easter") that cycles whimsically through multiple speech situations. Don Hewes (Fred Astaire) strolls down a street in New York, whistling to himself and exchanging holiday greetings with people he meets. He slips into soliloquy for a moment, reminded that he needs to buy a gift. In an elegant milliner's establishment, Don views a parade of models demonstrating the latest fashion in hats. The models enter one by one, each unrealistically contributing a sales pitch and wishing him a happy Easter. After Don makes his choice (in a brief exchange with the saleswoman), the models speak as one ("Wrap it up for the chap with a very happy Easter to you"). Don then moves on to his next purchase, while a chorus continues and concludes the song. The choral utterance suits the crowd we see on the street, as if it could be issuing from them, but in fact it is visually unsourced. No one's lips move, and the disembodied chorus follows Don into a florist's shop, covering up the sounds of his conversation with the salesperson there.

Choral utterances like this can't be traced to a specific origin in the fictional world. (They are acousmatic: sounds heard without seeing their source.)[18] Consequently, they possess an imprecise agency and indeterminate subjectivity—a slipperiness filmmakers can turn to their advantage.[19] In this instance, there is a tenuous nod to realism in providing an oblique audiovisual match. Although not synchronized to the people strolling on the avenue (thus not embodied), the voices, in their number and gender mix, approximate the sound the strollers would make if they were to sing. One way to interpret this situation is to conceive of the environment itself as animate, transmitting the thoughts or feelings of its inhabitants through their shadow-voices. A similar treatment occurs in *Some Like It Hot* (1959), after Sweet Sue's band arrives at the Miami hotel. As the band members rush down to the beach for a swim, a chorus of female voices sings the old favorite "By the Beautiful Sea." This is not a featured number in the film; it functions more as background music. Nevertheless, it resembles "Happy Easter" in shadow-vocalizing the young women on the beach to express an ambient good cheer.

In contrast, in another tribute to Miami (from *Moon over Miami*, 1941), the choral utterance lacks a bodily referent. Betty Grable hatches a scheme to marry a millionaire and heads to Florida with her family co-conspirators. As we see their airplane coming in over the skyline, a mixed choir starts to sing ("Oh Me, Oh Mi-Ami"), extolling the city's romance and glamour and urging it to live up to expectations. Presently we do see crowds of people poolside, water-skiing, and at the races. But the initial absence of a link between sound and source gives these voices an unanchored subjectivity, as if they speak for a throng of would-be visitors, which the viewer is invited to join. Finally, as Grable's party of three arrives at their hotel, the choir proclaims, "Miami, here I am," suggesting a transferral of the ambient utterance to the leading characters, who will soon sing it for themselves.

In general, disembodied voices evoke a human almost-presence or supra-presence, verbally articulate but unspecified as to location or agency. Their expression can consist of simple mood-painting, as in the romantic "Bella Notte" from *Lady and the Tramp* (1955).[20] Or they can be complexly conversant, like the chatty voices from "Happy Easter," who offer greetings, remark on the weather, express excitement, and address the main character directly ("everything seems to come your way").[21] Shadow-voices frequently appear in the final moments of a film musical, in an abridged reprise of a key melody: as the von Trapp family escapes over the border ("Climb Ev'ry Mountain," *The Sound of Music*), as the king of Siam expires ("Something Wonderful," *The King and I*, 1956), and at the fairy tale ending to *Beauty and the Beast* (title number, 1991), to name a few.[22] At such climactic moments, ambient voices lift the sentiments they express to an exalted plane. In *Easter Parade*, the famous title number is saved for last. The lead characters (Judy Garland and Fred Astaire) use the song to serenade each other, tying a bow in the love plot. But as the pair make their way outside, joining the crowds on Fifth Avenue, their singular voices give way to a massive disembodied chorus, acquiring magnificence as the camera pulls back to take in a larger view.

## Virtual Show

There are moments in *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), Todd Haynes's queer homage to glam rock, that are marked by a different sort of anomaly. During a narrative flashback exploring the early stages of Brian Slade's (Jonathan Rhys Meyers) career as a pop idol, Slade witnesses a performance by the devilish Curt Wild (Ewan McGregor)—a compound of eroticism, brashness, and glitter. The next morning, Slade broods, "I wish I'd thought of it myself." His wife replies, "You will," as the camera zooms in on his face. A wistful musical vamp steals in (around 37:45). Cut to a close-up of Wild's face (graphically matched to the shot of Slade's), gazing directly at the film viewer with a smirk and impudent wink. Another cut shows a wider view: costumed as a satyr and smudged with soot, Wild balances precariously on a chimney, an animate figure against a painted backdrop of a twilit London skyline. The teetering satyr leaps up and disappears down the chimney in a puff of smoke, the camera pulling back to rescale the background image as a painting hung on a blank white wall in a gilded frame. Slade comes into view, in archaic foppish attire, gazing at the painting through a monocle. He starts a vocal solo ("The Ballad of Maxwell Demon"), turning to address the camera head-on. From this point, the musical performance claims our full attention and proceeds uninterrupted. Editing and framing during the featured song follow a music-video aesthetic: pairing continuous music with discontinuous images, intercutting between several parallel streams of action, dropping in and out of lip-syncing, favoring scenic artifice and spectacular, dream-like imagery (such as the glittering lizard-man who engages in a fast-motion bisexual orgy with inflatable dolls, then shreds guitar as the house burns down around him). Though anachronistic for the time of the story (early 1970s), the music-video format entails a familiar mode of audiovision for the millennial spectator.

But before settling into the space of the song, our exit from the narrative mode is anything but smooth. There is a clashing of gears in the juxtaposition of the two close-ups. What is the relation, spatially and subjectively, between the shot of Slade in the natural world, wrapped up in his personal story, and the ensuing shot of Wild in a flat, artificially constructed space, erasing the fourth wall by returning our gaze? Is the intrusive image of Wild a thought bubble attributed to Slade? Does it represent a trickster figure yanking us up to a meta-narrative level? When the satyr disappears and Slade reappears, the latter regains narrative focus, but his appearance and manner are so altered from the soft femininity he exhibits in the scene just ended that we are uncertain as to temporal and logical sequence. Once the featured song is over, there is another sharp ellipsis in time and space: a cut to a row of mute, dour men in suits (executives?) behind a table in an ill-defined, darkened environment, then the brash agent Jerry Devine applauding. Upon reflection, it's possible to infer a narrative framework for the entire sequence: Wild's punk performance inspires Slade to retailor his own image, abandoning bohemian androgyny for tart theatrical mannerism, trying out his new aesthetic in a demo that is privately screened for prospective backers. Such a conceptual through-line, once grasped, supplies the missing story logic, but Haynes prefers to withhold the connective tissue and slice capriciously into the narrative with a self-contained, idealized musical performance, so that the viewer loses the thread.

Which brings me to the question of address. As professionally staged entertainment, Slade's performance of "The Ballad of Maxwell Demon" qualifies as presentational—but presented for whom? Does my concept of presentational address still apply if there is no diegetic audience? The song in question is introduced early in the film via live performance in realistic space, with Slade mounting the stage to the cheers of adoring fans (before being shot by an intruder). In the video-style sequence, however, we no longer observe a musical interaction secondhand; all the performers address us directly. From the moment Wild winks at the camera, the illusion of a surrogate fictional audience falls away. Instead of spelling out how film viewers might logically be sutured in as spectators of an embedded fictional video, Haynes skips the intervening steps and gives us unmediated access to the footage. By doing it this way, he renders us unsure whether the number represents a filmic object (a video or broadcast) belonging to the fictional world, or whether we have abandoned the fictional world for a passage of free cinematic discourse, with the director displaying and manipulating his characters at will. Here is another situation where "the boundaries of the diegetic world . . . dissolve under the force of song."[23] In this type of musical utterance, the staging and editing of a show are conceived with the film spectator in mind, bypassing or downplaying the pretext of a fictional audience; fictional performers may address the camera, violating the fourth wall; the frame of their presentational performance merges with the cinematic frame. I call this type of utterance a virtual show.[24]

The first complete number in *Velvet Goldmine*, "Hot One," provides another example. The song's intro enters as a sound advance under transitional imagery, the performance sequence beginning in earnest when we see a close-up of Slade's hand clutching a microphone (around 11:00). Slade sings to the camera, still in close-up; then the camera pulls back to reveal the other members of the band, on a darkened stage but without sight or sound of an audience. As the song continues, it recedes into the sonic background, while BBC-style footage and voice-over describe Slade's celebrity at the forefront of a sexual and fashion revolution. Visual imagery alternates between interviews with fans and band members, shots of the band performing in a studio setting, and music-video footage of Slade lip-syncing into the camera while moving through outdoor space and grabbing a smooch from a boy on the street. For the most part, the sequence positions us as virtual viewers of an embedded documentary (contemporary with Slade's ascendancy). But at one of the mentions of homosexuality, the director inserts images of a diegetic audience—Arthur Stuart (Christian Bale), the teenage fan whose perspective we have been closely following, sitting in a smoky movie theater among older men, one of whom makes a pass at him. The persistence of the soundtrack during this brief insert gives the impression that Arthur is watching the same TV documentary we have been watching, although this seems implausible in the setting, which suggests an adult movie theater. The moment has a split effect, returning us from a virtual position to the perspective of a viewer within the story, yet implying a discrepancy between what he and we are viewing.[25] "Hot One" ends with another close-up of Slade onstage. When he gazes into our eyes, the image freezes, then distorts and degrades, as if the reel of film has jammed in the projector and melted. As the framing narrative picks up again, we flash forward across the years to the adult Arthur's workplace, where his co-workers have just screened the foregoing documentary as archival footage, anchoring us once more in a fictional viewing situation.

Such play with virtual address is not a postmodern invention. In fact, the expository device of an embedded documentary, virtual at first and reframed as a fictional screening, is one of *Velvet Goldmine*'s overt allusions to *Citizen Kane* (1941). In musicals, virtual show numbers can be traced back to Busby Berkeley's backstage comedies from the 1930s, with their non-naturalistic treatment of space and optical phenomena. As Martin Rubin notes:

> On the level of scale, [Berkeley's] numbers create a constant and rapid progress into new and enormous spaces that could not possibly [be accommodated] within the confines of any theatrical stage. . . . In terms of effects, the numbers create configurations that are feasible only with a movie camera, on an editing table, or in a special effects lab.[26]

For instance, "I Only Have Eyes for You" (*Dames*, 1934) is framed as a show in a theater; we see the curtain open. But the image behind the curtain—a low angle view of a street in the theater district, the underside of a car blocking our view as it rolls over the camera—drops all pretense of realistic sightlines and positions us as cinematic viewers. As the number unfolds, the shot sequence cuts quickly between multiple perspectives, with ostentatious use of mobile camera and special visual effects ("they all disappear from view"). When the young beau (Dick Powell) begins to fantasize about his sweetheart's face (Ruby Keeler), Berkeley introduces a passage of abstract patterns executed by a troupe of frilly female replicas, featuring direct camera address, magical changes in scale, and transformations between animate and two-dimensional figures. Unlike "The Ballad of Maxwell Demon," which begins in unmediated fashion, forcing us to hypothesize about our viewing perspective, the Berkeley number provides us with the narrative pretext of a theatrical show, only to substitute a virtual filmic entertainment unconstrained by that pretext.[27] Similar to "Maxwell Demon," Berkeley takes advantage of the number to indulge in free cinematic discourse.

Another classic example of this type occurs in *Singin' in the Rain*, when Don (Gene Kelly) pitches an idea for a big cinematic number ("The Broadway Ballet"), and we get a sneak peek in virtual form. At the end of *Till the Clouds Roll By* (1946), a biopic of songwriter Jerome Kern, the composer visits a Hollywood soundstage during filming of a medley of his songs. Very soon into the eleven-minute number, the backstage pretext is dropped in order to present the finished film sequence to the virtual viewer. In fact, we never return from the embedded sequence to the framing narrative. The climax of the number—a spectacular visualization (crafted in postproduction) of Frank Sinatra and the MGM orchestra floating in the clouds—serves as the end of the film.[28]

In rare cases, virtual presentation structures an entire film. *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946) is conceived as a virtual revue, a succession of acts paying homage to bygone theatrical forms while completely dispensing with a fictional audience. Most of the numbers in the film version of *Chicago* (2002) come across as virtual (or nearly so), though they differ from my other examples by presenting theatrical, not filmic, entertainments,[29] by offering occasional glimpses of audience members below and around the vaudeville stage as if we were positioned among them,[30] and by allowing non-musical passages of realistic action and dialogue to infiltrate the numbers, as if toggling back and forth between parallel worlds.

This type of utterance, by defying normative performer/audience relations within the story world, makes us question whom the characters are addressing, whom they are singing and dancing for. It revokes the illusion of distance between the fictional performers and the film viewer. Funny things happen with address in the number “That’s Entertainment” from the backstage musical *The Band Wagon*. Surrounded by stage paraphernalia, three members of a creative team converse with the fourth, trying to convince him of the fundamental unity of highbrow and lowbrow art forms. Once he gets their point, all four join together, celebrating show business and clowning around with props. But as they do so, they stop addressing each other and start playing to an imaginary audience, eventually lining up in a row and selling it to the camera. Because the characters are theater people, their participation in a social exchange (bonding, clowning) takes a presentational form (improvising, entertaining)—another happy convergence of realism and stylization, supplying a plausible motive for a virtual show. On the other hand, realism is abandoned when “That’s Entertainment” is reprised at the end of the film. The entire cast of the fictional Broadway production gathers to thank Tony (Fred Astaire) for his leadership. In the middle of this solemn, heartfelt exchange, the other three members of the creative team break in, asking, “May we say something?” This is their cue to burst into song, wildly changing the subject to describe the qualities of an effective show, with no earthly reason why they should have to make this point to Tony just at this moment. As other cast members join in, the lyrics become increasingly self-referential until they break the fourth wall: “As we sing this finale, we hope it was up your alley.” For the final shot, the lead characters once again line up in a row facing the camera, addressing the actual audience as at the close of a Shakespeare play.[31]

Everyone knows that the musical stylizes expressive utterance by rendering it formal and euphonious—by turning it into music. But as we have seen, the genre has many other ways of stylizing utterance, presenting it as excessive, displaced, unsourced, iconic, or over-coordinated. The two aesthetic strategies—shifts in expressive mode and anomalies of address—can operate independently. Thus in the opening number of *Swing Time* (1936), where Ginger Rogers tells Fred Astaire to “Pick Yourself Up,” her singing is stylized (shifting mode), but the speech situation is realistic (a conversation during a dance lesson). In “I Only Have Eyes for You,” the singing is realistic (part of a Broadway show), but the virtual address is anomalous. Nor can we trust the situation to remain constant within a number: “Bella Notte,” for instance, begins as a realistic serenade at a restaurant and dissolves into ambient voices.

In the reprise of “That’s Entertainment,” neither singing nor speech situation is realistic. There may be no mundane reason for Tony and company to behave the way they do, but in the realm of artifice reasons abound: formal recapitulation, sensory plenitude, rhetorical intensification, and textural accumulation in the drive to closure. All such stylistic desiderata could be fulfilled without sacrificing realism, as the initial performance of the song makes clear, so something extra is conveyed by metaphorically crunching gears. By skipping so suddenly from plot-sense to style-impulse at this final juncture, the film throws logic to the winds, making anomaly (whimsy, comic disregard) an appreciable component of the aesthetic experience.

As a genre, the film musical has dual allegiances to principles of realism and stylization.[32] While this allows for a doubling of creative resources, it also entails a perceptual duplicity, an ability to switch tracks. Transitions from one track to another can be seamless and disguised (sneaking into) or abrupt and exposed (bursting into). As viewers, we may be persuaded to forget one perspective temporarily, but the dual framework is never completely erased. We apprehend this or that musical performance through two divergent filters: that of representational norms and that of aesthetic impact. What strikes us as anomalous from one point of view feels emancipating from the other.

## Notes

1. Graham Wood, "Why Do They Start to Sing and Dance All of a Sudden? Examining the Film Musical," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, 2nd ed., ed. William A. Everett and Paul R. Laird (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 306.
2. Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 62–63.
3. James Buhler, David Neumeyer, and Rob Deemer, *Hearing the Movies: Music and Sound in Film History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 83. For a comprehensive critique of such usage, see Nina Penner, "Rethinking the Diegetic/Nondiegetic Distinction in the Film Musical," *Music and the Moving* Image 10, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 3–20.
4. Altman, *American Film Musical*, 63.
5. Erin Brannigan, *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 141.
6. Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 67.
7. "The differential between cinematic realism and MERM [Musically Enhanced Reality Mode] heightens the potentially difficult 'reality' threshold that must be crossed in order to enter or leave the musical number." Raymond Knapp and Mitchell Morris, "The Filmed Musical," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 144.
8. For example, at the first sight of the African tribe dancing in *King Kong* (1933), their drums are sweetened with Western orchestral instruments.
9. See the discussion in Lloyd Whitesell, *Wonderful Design: Glamour in the Hollywood Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 75–77.
10. He goes on: "This privileged moment cannot last forever, however" (Altman, *American Film Musical*, 66).
11. David M. Halperin, *How to Be Gay* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012), 104–105, glossing D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essay on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
12. Nina Penner proposes an analytical model that locates musical numbers on a spectrum "from extreme realism to extreme fantasy," considering the performance situation, the acoustic properties of the performance, the source of musical accompaniment, and the proficiency of the performers. "Tracking where numbers fall on the realism–fantasy

spectrum is of relevance to understanding the musical's tendency to represent an idealized or utopian vision of the world" (Penner, "Rethinking the Diegetic/Nondiegetic Distinction," 13).

13. For another number where an initial conversation motivates a soliloquy on the move through busy public space, consider "Don't Rain on My Parade" (*Funny Girl*, 1968).
14. Both stage and screen musicals feature out-of-the-ordinary utterances. Some types originated onstage, while others are cinematic.
15. The film version, by never showing the nuns singing, treats the vocal part as ambient voices, an utterance type discussed below. For a discussion of functional differences between the ancient Greek chorus and the chorus in the American musical, see Barbara Means Fraser, "Revisiting Greece: The Sondheim Chorus," in *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook*, ed. Joanne Gordon (New York: Garland, 1997), 223–249.
16. This is apparently an accident resulting from lack of coordination between the songwriters and costume designers.
17. In this, the film affirms mythic patterns crucial to the genre (though usually implicit), as Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans argue in *Blue Skies and Silver Linings: Aspects of the Hollywood Musical* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 16–17. Another number that mutates from a conversation into speechifying is "People" from *Funny Girl*, where Fanny Brice (Barbra Streisand) unrealistically launches into a one-way explanation of her personal philosophy of human relationships.
18. Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 71–73. Though acousmatic voices may occasionally figure in stage musicals, they are more commonly a cinematic technique, exploiting the resources of post-synchronized sound and visual framing.
19. "A sound or voice that remains acousmatic creates a mystery of the nature of its source, its properties and its powers, given that causal listening cannot supply complete information about the sound's nature and the events taking place" (Chion, *Audio-Vision,* 72).
20. The second half of this number uses an ambient choir; the first half is a realistic serenade of the canine couple. See Whitesell, *Wonderful Design*, 25, 111.
21. The "Optimistic Voices" in *The Wizard of Oz* also address the main characters as they approach the Emerald City ("You're out of the woods").
22. This device is particular to film, where it's easy to add invisible voices during sound synchronization. Final choruses in the theater are typically displayed onstage. Neither *The Sound of Music* nor *The King and I* concludes with offstage voices in its original staging.
23. Buhler, Neumeyer, and Deemer, *Hearing the Movies*, 83.
24. My thoughts on certain anomalous utterances were clarified and refined with the help of my research assistants.
25. Two other inserts in this number puncture the illusion of an embedded documentary: a pink title card quoting Norman Brown, and a newspaper headline about the Slade assassination, which postdates the time of the documentary footage.
26. Martin Rubin, *Showstoppers: Busby Berkeley and the Tradition of Spectacle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 38.
27. Berkeley omits any pretext at the opening of *The Gang's All Here* (1943), which begins with a virtual show ("Brazil") in the cinematic frame, and only later reveals the fictional theatrical context.
28. For more descriptive detail, see Whitesell, *Wonderful Design*, 42–43.

29. The floor show medley from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (including “Rose Tint My World,” “Don’t Dream It,” and “Wild and Untamed Thing”) is another virtual theatrical entertainment, performed in burlesque costume on a proscenium stage for an absent audience.
30. Exceptionally, “Cell Block Tango” is performed in a virtual stage space without a proscenium or any sight of an audience (after the initial pretext of Roxie seating herself at a cabaret table to watch).
31. Raymond Knapp draws attention to an important distinction between live and recorded musicals having to do with address, namely, “how immediate engagements between performers and audiences matter and play out in musical theater, and how the absence of this element in film musicals affects both their construction and the manner of audience involvement.” He illustrates this point by focusing on the convention of the theatrical finale, “leading to the final curtain, and followed immediately by bows and curtain calls. . . . This ritual of mutual acknowledgment is completely absent in film musicals, although it is sometimes replicated in some form.” Virtual address is one such form. Knapp, “Getting Off the Trolley: Musicals *contra* Cinematic Reality,” in *From Stage to Screen: Musical Films in Europe and United States (1927–1961)*, ed. Massimiliano Sala (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 160–161.
32. In describing “the felt incongruity between an historically evolving sense of filmic realism and the cultivated artificialities of the stage musical,” Knapp implies that realism is a cinematic attribute foreign to the theatrical genre (Knapp, “Getting Off the Trolley,” 158). But the stage musical has had its own evolving commitments to dramatic integrity and psychological naturalism, while the cinema has cultivated artifice in equal measure.

## CHAPTER 2

# "MAKE LIKE YOU'RE SINGING IT"

## *Performing Musical Texture in Judy Garland's Early Films*

### DOMINIC SYMONDS

Judy Garland is one of the most celebrated performers from Hollywood's Golden Age. She appeared in thirty-two musical films[1] and introduced dozens of defining moments on the screen. Much has been written about the way in which the Hollywood studio system abused Garland, and especially how her on-screen image was manipulated by gendered assumptions about femininity, in terms of both her looks and her dancing body: biographers such as Gerold Frank have exposed the manipulations of the studio system on Garland's aesthetic image,[2] scholars such as Adrienne McLean have considered the way in which her kinesic body mapped the control of the studios into her physical performances,[3] and figures such as Richard Dyer have explored how dynamics of psychological suffering can be witnessed in Garland's work on film.[4] However, others like Ciara Barrett have reclaimed for Garland an element of ownership over her roles thanks to her "exceptional qualities as both a singer and emotive actor."[5] Barrett suggests that Garland's films "resisted objective, particularly visual, fetishization" and instead prioritized the star's "aural affect," "signifying pure emotion, pure affect through her vocal performance."[6] In this essay, I'd like to expand on Barrett's emphasis on the voice, not by pursuing her consideration of vocal affect, but by suggesting that Garland's musicality gave her a unique way of controlling her vocal presence on the screen. I'm going to explore how Garland used her exceptional musical skills to craft the music of her performance—not the music of her songs per se, but the music of her acting.

Undoubtedly, it was Garland's voice that opened Hollywood's doors, charmed audiences' hearts and attracted so much popular appeal; and her talents as a singer were recognized throughout her career, whether she was swinging jazzy two-steps, belting heartfelt torch songs, or crooning winsome laments. But more than this, I will suggest that Garland brought her abilities as a singer—or more specifically, as a musician—into her wider performance, crafting her acting approach with musical qualities inspired by Mickey Rooney. “You’re talented,” Mickey Rooney’s character tells her in *Babes on Broadway* (1941) before asking her to sing him a song. “How do you know I can sing?” she asks, and he responds: “Because you sing when you talk, when you walk. Why, your eyes are singing now.”

Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland first met when she enrolled at “Ma Lawlor’s,” the academic wing of the Hollywood Conservatory of Music and Arts, in 1934. “When I knew her at Ma Lawlor’s Professional School, she had more bounce to the ounce than everyone else in the school put together,” Rooney recalls; she “sang ‘Zing Went the Strings of My Heart’ with the kind of verve that made our heartstrings, all ninety of us from the Lawlor School, go bing, ding, ping, ring, ting, and zing.”[7] It’s an anecdote that perfectly characterizes not only the exuberance of Garland in her films, but also the hyperbole of Rooney in his. In just this one statement, a comment from his 1991 autobiography *Life Is Too Short*, Rooney reminds us of the energy and excitement of the summer-stock movies that made him and Garland so popular.

Rhetorical flourishes aside, Rooney’s is a common enough perspective on his costar’s teenage brilliance: “a talent for singing, a trick of rocking the spectator with rhythms, and a capacity for putting emotion into her performance,” crooned one excited reviewer.[8] Even this young, Garland had a voice that everybody could recognize as exceptional; and she had experience too, having performed in vaudeville with her family act the Gumm Sisters for several years. She was surely a natural prospect for Hollywood’s blossoming musical films.

Even so, musical films also required acting, and when Garland first saw herself in her early screen work in the mid-1930s, she was horrified, as Rooney remembers: “it was the most awful moment in her life . . . she didn’t even want to talk about it afterward.”[9] Garland expands on this in her own recollection: “I thought that I was bad. I had tried too hard. I thought I overacted something awful,”[10] she reports, crediting her newfound friend and colleague for her early development. “It was Mickey Rooney who gave me my first real insight into acting,” she admitted: “Just before our first scene together, he took my hands and said, ‘Honey, you gotta believe this, now. Make like you’re singing it.’ And all at once I knew what I had been doing wrong.”[11]

It’s a recollection that suggests Rooney was, at least in part, responsible for coaching Garland on her acting, and specifically how to deal with dialogue. It’s not a story that Rooney corroborates—nor is it one that Garland subsequently recalls; perhaps it is just throwaway interview fluff. But given the persistent fascination of audiences with Garland and her work, it’s worth considering what Rooney may have meant, how Garland may have responded, and how this reported advice might have shaped the later technique of one of Hollywood’s best-loved stars.

In this chapter, I’ll consider some of Garland’s performances as responses to that advice. I will suggest that, under the influence of key figures in the studios, the young star’s appearances on screen (and on radio) were carefully composed into the structures of music and the expression of song—controlled, just like other features of her persona. In this way, the guidance to "make like you're singing it"—whether or not it was a suggestion of Rooney's—became a principle for the way in which dramatic scenes of speech and song were woven into the texture of Garland's MGM movies. I'll start with a look at Mickey Rooney's own acting development during this period; then, I'll consider some of Garland's song practices, which were developed first through radio broadcasts, then on screen. I'll look at some of the films in which Garland and Rooney worked together; and I'll recognize the influence not only of Rooney but also, perhaps more substantially, of figures like Roger Edens in Garland's career. This will reveal how Garland's entire presentation as an actor was cultivated by the studios—not just her physical aesthetic and the image of her screen body, as has been argued before. Yet what makes this aspect of Garland's cultivated performance different from that of her looks, her image, and her dancing body is the degree to which she was able to inhabit and therefore take back control of the vocal contours of her performative aesthetic. Ultimately, I will suggest that it is Garland's inherent musicality—evidenced in her work—that allowed her to "make like you're singing it" and own her onscreen identity.

I'm using the approach of transcribing into music, and sometimes graphics, a selection of Garland's spoken scenes, to establish what musicality might be identified in her performances. This is by its nature an inexact science, since neither musical notation nor graphics are particularly equipped to deal with the expression of the spoken voice. Not only do we speak using many more pitches than the formal tempered scale allows, but we rarely commit to a meter in our delivery that might enable us to capture its rhythm. More than this, the voice is resonant with tones, textures, and harmonics, which in expressive use are complicated to discern. Nevertheless, in trying to pin down the musical qualities of Garland's performances, I seek to determine whether her undoubted musical talents as a singer were translated to her wider work as an actor. Using this technique, I explore the extent to which Judy Garland's success may be accounted for by that advice to "make like you're singing it" and her subsequent expressive control.

## *PIGSKIN PARADE* (1936) AND *THOROUGHBREDS DON'T CRY* (1937)

The appearance that Garland so detested was her role in *Pigskin Parade* (1936). For this, she had been loaned to Twentieth Century–Fox by MGM, who had yet to feature her in a full-length movie. Garland plays Sairy, the sister of a hick from the sticks who is recruited to be the star player of the Texas State University football team. She has three opportunities to display her singing skills—all presentational songs—and in these it's very evident that the young performer has star singing appeal. However, when she has (infrequent) lines of dialogue, she is hampered by a cod Southern accent and clunky lines ("Y'all stopped fer melons?"). It's fair to say that the screenplay doesn't give her a great deal to play with in terms of her acting, though her delivery of the scripted material is also limited in terms of its musicality in comparison to her better-known films.

Her first appearance with Rooney was in *Thoroughbreds Don't Cry* (1937), which gave Garland better opportunities to develop her acting. This was a vehicle for Rooney, who plays champion jockey Timmie Donovan. Garland is Cricket West, whose Aunt Edie runs the jockeys' boarding house. When the precocious Brit Roger Calverton comes to the house looking for Donovan, he and Cricket strike up a friendship. In his first encounter with Cricket, she is practicing the piano—a piece by Chopin that segues into the film's only song, "Got a Pair of New Shoes." Garland is in fine form swinging this number, and as she professes her aspirations to be a singer and an actor, it gives her the chance to perform a number of set pieces satirizing melodramatic acting styles.

"I'm going to be a great singer. And I'm going to be a great actress too," she announces. "Are you really?," asks Roger, and with that, Cricket launches into an intense display of sincerity, as can be seen in ▶ Video example 2.1. "Yes." She pauses. "Oh yes." Another pause. "What else can one do down here?," she sing-songs, sprawling over the piano keyboard; "There is something . . . something inside of me that says . . . that says . . .". She breaks off. "Oh well. Why am I telling you all this?," but when Roger seems hooked, she continues, rising from the piano stool and clasping her hands in prayer for effect. "You would not know! . . . You would not care!," she exclaims; "But when there is a strange yearning in one's soul . . . for the beautiful beyond . . . I think one should go," she concludes with a Marlene Dietrich accent.

The melodrama continues, though at this stage it is sufficient to note that in her mimicry Garland calls on certain musical qualities like energy, pace, pitch, rhythm, and articulation to augment her performance. Indeed, so overt is her use of these devices that it is possible to notate some of the phrases in order to give an indication of just how musically she performs them (Figure 2.1).

As can be seen, there is a clearly structured musical pattern to her delivery, rooted around a particular key and performed in a discernible meter. To these features, the script contributes further expressive elements of rhetoric, especially forms of repetition such as anaphora and epizeuxis: "You would not know! . . . You would not care!"; "Don't talk. Don't speak. Don't say anything!"; and "I'm going mad . . . mad . . . MAD." In combination, the hyperbole of the language and her articulation of it—sometimes staccato ("Don't talk. Don't speak"), sometimes phrased in legato sweeps ("But when there is a strange yearning in one's soul"), gives her acting a significant musical quality, which in this instance is excused by the dramaturgical logic of the pastiche. Elsewhere,

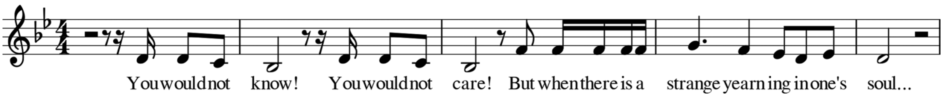

**FIGURE 2.1** Transcribed excerpt from Garland's melodramatic pastiche from early in *Thoroughbreds Don't Cry* (1937). Note how the expressive pattern is clearly structured both rhythmically and melodically.

however, it is this same sort of musicality that Garland begins to standardize within her "naturalistic" performance of even conventional scenes in order to bring it to the elevated level of song.

Rooney's own performance in this movie is characteristically ebullient, and it shares some of the same qualities, at least of energy, pace, and rhythm, that Garland shows in the melodrama sequence. Granted, Rooney's character Timmie Donovan is not pastiching a style; this is simply his somewhat mannered attempt to stereotype an arrogant jockey. But perhaps it was in capturing these qualities that Rooney recognized a similarity between acting and song. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between Rooney's handling of musical elements in his performances, and the mastery of musicality that Garland displays. In short, Rooney's acting maximizes rhetoric, phrasing, and dynamics to gain its effect; Garland develops her unique abilities and knowledge of singing to compose in her acting performances "arias" of her own.

## Mickey Rooney

Rooney started acting during the silent era, when he was just six years old; he became a household name from his performances in long-running series, first as Mickey McGuire (1927–1936) and then as Andy Hardy (1937–1946). Around his fifteenth birthday, he was working for Max Reinhardt, not only in the film version of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but also on a live performance at Hollywood Bowl to an audience of 24,000 people. And in 1940, having already been honored with a special Juvenile Award by the Academy in 1939, he was nominated for the Best Actor Oscar for his part in *Babes in Arms*—all before he hit his twenties.

In his autobiography, Rooney considers himself to have "hit [his] stride" as an actor in *Hoosier Schoolboy*, a 1937 drama about a troubled teenager from the wrong side of the tracks.[12] "I had a good role and I knew it, and I played it for exactly what it was worth," he writes; "in fact, I underplayed it and won some critical acclaim for my acting."[13] Swiftly followed by 1938's *Boys Town*, for which he received generally favorable reviews, this marked a maturing of both his style and the sort of roles he could command, and revealed an actor with a sensitive approach to complex characters. "Rooney takes what could have been a very basic role by any other actor, and gives [it] some real depth," suggests James Neibaur.[14] Even so, the star's own assessment of his performances seems hit-and-miss. At some points in his autobiography he seems to equate "good" acting with crying on camera ("my ability to turn myself on and off 'like a faucet' ");[15] at other times, he points to what seem rather artificial contrivances as examples of craft ("When I wanted to show Tom deep in thought, I pulled furiously on my left eyebrow. That piece of business seemed to work").[16] At still other times, he references a plethora of diverse performative antics ("I acted my fool head off. I sang. I danced. I played seven musical instruments. I did imitations. . . . I even cried a bit. It may have been the best picture I ever made").[17] In short, Rooney's judgment of his own abilities as a performer offers little indication that the craft of “good acting” is something that he has learned or understood.

Still, his critique of other actors is rather more refined, and he recognizes certain qualities of their performances as being key, especially those of Judy Garland: “her comic timing was terrific,” he writes; “She could also deliver a poignant line with just the right amount of hesitation, slowly enough for the sadness to hit hard but still stay short of schmaltz.”[18] This gives us something of a window into the craft Rooney instinctively brought to his work, and his recognition of that craft in other people’s performances even if he couldn’t always recognize it in his own. It is a command over timing, and over the qualities of energy pace, and rhythm—the rhetoric of performance—that is most evident in this critique and in some of his finest scenes, especially when the scenes were scripted to maximize that rhythmic dimension.

In *Babes on Broadway* (1941), for example, Rooney’s character Tommy is known as a precocious leader and speechmaker, and throughout the film, characters insistently compare him to figures such as Abraham Lincoln (33:58; 42:07; 56:44). Indeed, like Lincoln’s speeches, Tommy’s are full of rhetorical devices and rhythmical structures that build to a compelling climax (see ▶ Video example 2.2):

> Mr. Busch, you’re not gonna keep these starving kiddies away from the babbling brooks, and the birds that sing, and the vitamins A, B, C, and D. You’re not gonna be responsible for young America growing up with the rickets. Oh no. Not you, Mr. Busch. Not a man who reminds me so much of Thomas Jefferson. (40:52)

Here, Rooney’s tongue-in-cheek delivery pastiches the style of a politician, building the first part of the speech in waves of upward inflection that incrementally rise (“the babbling brooks, . . . the birds that sing, . . . the vitamins A, B, C, and D. . . . young America growing up with the rickets”) before dropping the pace and pitch (“Oh no. Not you, Mr. Busch”), and finally topping everything with the momentum of the final line (“Not a man who reminds me so much of Thomas Jefferson”).

And Tommy himself is aware of the power of his speeches, equating them either to music (“so I slide right into the theme song,” he quips about this one) or to theatrical performance. Later in the movie, when he finally acknowledges his feelings for Penny, he self-consciously invokes a “love scene” (▶ Video example 2.3):

> Were . . . were . . . were you ever in a rainstorm and you felt like you were the only person in the world that wasn’t getting wet? Did you ever look up and see a full moon and, well, it only looked like a half a moon to you because you were looking at it all alone? Penny, did you ever find someone and . . . and . . . all of a sudden, you felt like you were taking off, right out into space like a propeller going round and round and round, 30,000 revolutions a minute, and there wasn’t any landing fields left in the world? (1:15:31)

In this scene, Rooney constructs another build-up of momentum over the first three questions (“Were you ever in a rainstorm . . .”; “Did you ever look up and see a full

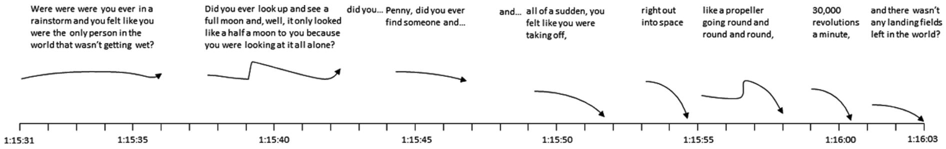
Were were were you ever in a rainstorm and you felt like you were the only person in the world that wasn't getting wet?
Did you ever look up and see a full moon and, well, it only looked like a half a moon to you because you were looking at it all alone?
did you...
Penny, did you ever find someone and...
and...
all of a sudden, you felt like you were taking off,
right out into space
like a propeller going round and round and round,
30,000 revolutions a minute,
and there wasn't any landing fields left in the world?
1:15:31
1:15:35
1:15:40
1:15:45
1:15:50
1:15:55
1:16:00
1:16:03

**FIGURE 2.2** Diagram of the shape of Rooney's "love scene" speech in *Babes on Broadway* (1941).

moon . . .?"; "Penny, did you ever find someone . . .?") (Figure 2.2). Then he pulls back sharply to a more intimate energy as the camera zooms in empathetically to a mid-shot. Now he places a series of equally phrased statements, each shaped like an arc ("all of a sudden you felt like you were taking off"; "right out into space"; "like a propeller going round and round and round"; "30,000 revolutions a minute"; "and there wasn't any landing fields left in the world"). He allows Judy's character Penny the chance to mimic this phrasing as she responds as if in a duet. And then with a soft, sensitive murmur of her name, and a similar response from her, they conclude with a gentle kiss. It's a carefully crafted scene that combines the rhythms of the script with the rhythms of the performance and the rhythms of the camera.

As can be seen from both of these examples, Tommy's use of rhetorical devices is confident and sophisticated: he repeats the opening phrase of his sentences for added effect; he builds his images in groups of three; he extends each element of the sentence for impact; and then finally the structure is concluded with a two-part climax. (The second is provided by Penny as she duets with his rhetorical flair: "I've had that feeling. And it all started in a drugstore.")[19] Clearly this is in part to do with the screenwriting, but with high-quality material, Rooney is able to respond with discernible skill.

Of course, it is not hard to see in such rhetorical structuring a certain musicality that lends itself to a filmic texture already marked by passages of song. Indeed, the self-conscious rhetoric that is written into Tommy's stylistic patterns of speech usefully signals one of the ways in which Garland's own patterns of speech were given structure through similar rhetorical devices as she transitioned from stage performances with the Gumm Sisters in the early 1930s to performances mediatized by technology (on radio and film) just a few years later. On the other hand, Rooney's musical aptitude in these examples is very much defined by rhetoric, rhythm, and phrasing rather than by qualities of harmonic sensitivity, melody, and pitch. These would be the added ingredients that would define Garland's reinvention of her acting approach.

## Roger Edens

A key figure in this transition was the musical director at MGM, Roger Edens. Edens started working at MGM in 1934 and was a fundamental part of the celebrated Freed Unit from the moment Arthur Freed stepped up to produce movies in 1939 with *The Wizard of Oz*. The Freed Unit would be responsible for most of the classic MGM musicals throughout the 1940s and the 1950s: Gene Kelly's dance spectaculars like *On the Town* (1949), *An American in Paris* (1951), and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952); a string of Fred Astaire vehicles like *Easter Parade* (1948), *The Band Wagon* (1953), and *Silk Stockings* (1957); and the Rooney and Garland summer-stock films *Babes in Arms* (1939), *Strike Up the Band* (1940), *Babes on Broadway* (1941), and *Girl Crazy* (1943). Even before these, Edens had become a formative influence on Garland, accompanying her throughout her New York vaudeville run at Loew's State Theater in 1936, and becoming something of a "professional and personal adviser," according to Hugh Fordin.[20] "Edens taught Garland that singing into a microphone required her to tone down her dynamic vaudeville delivery," writes Philip Furia.[21] "He coached her; he taught her to sing softly and from the heart; he dissuaded her from singing songs too sophisticated for a girl of her age," Fordin continues. More than this, he coordinated the musical arrangements for a number of radio appearances Garland made, where, as Fordin notes, "His artistic ingenuity and tasteful choice of material brought about Judy's extraordinary success with radio audiences."[22]

I am going to explore a number of approaches adopted by Edens and Garland in their handling of her performances. Any sense of development in their approaches is by no means chronological, which perhaps points to a broad experimentation over an intense period (1937–1941). Indeed, some of the most sophisticated examples of their work fall rather early on in the period, but I argue that it was through this experimentation that Garland learned by the end of this period how to harness musical qualities of energy, pace, pitch, rhythm, and articulation and incorporate these into her acting approach. In understanding how she could capture those qualities from a script and bring them into her delivery of the material, I suggest, Garland learned how to "make like you're singing it."

First, I'll consider how some of these qualities were deliberately and self-consciously written into Garland's material in what was known as "rhythmic dialogue," a stylistic idiosyncrasy of the time. Next, I'll look at a number of songs Edens wrote for Garland that incorporated spoken monologues between the sung verses, enabling her to "duet" with the underscore. Finally, I'll consider her performance of non-musical speech from the movie *Babes on Broadway*. Through this analytical journey, Garland's development of a musicalized acting style can clearly be seen.

## RHYTHMIC DIALOGUE

The vogue for rhythmic dialogue was something that had underpinned experiments in movie musicals in the first part of the decade—particularly those of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart in a short-lived Hollywood break from their regular Broadway adventures. This began with their work on *The Hot Heiress* (1931), which toyed with the device by way of emulating the rhythms of urban expansion.[23] The following year they would work with Rouben Mamoulian on *Love Me Tonight* (1932), and among the many innovations in that film was an extension of the rhythmic dialogue idea. In the run-up to the film's main hit song, "Isn't It Romantic?," Maurice Chevalier, playing the tailor Maurice, provides one of his clients with a suit, and the dialogue begins (▶ Video example 2.4):

EMILE: Just think—with a little cloth, you make a work of art—
MAURICE: A tailor's art! For your sweetheart!
EMILE: It's like poetry in a book—
Oh, how beautiful I look.
MAURICE: The love song of the needle,
United with the thread—
The romance of the scissors—
EMILE: So Claire and I can wed!

As Lorenz Hart explains, "it isn't rhyme, it isn't anything like it; but it's screen talk and it isn't difficult if you know the medium."[24] More than this, he recognizes in the performances of even non-singing movie stars of the day a discernible rhythm in their speech that he associates with the medium of film: "Take the great screen actors and actresses, Bette Davis, Eddie Robinson, Jimmy Cagney, Spencer Tracy. They all talk in rhythm. And rhythm and movement are the life of the screen," he observes.[25] Rodgers and Hart's experiments continued in their subsequent films, *The Phantom President* (1932) and *Hallelujah, I'm a Bum!* (1933). Extended sequences in both of these movies reflect a sophisticated handling of the aural textures that were possible on film, creating lengthy scenes that move between underscored conversation, rhythmic dialogue, recitative, and song. Working with stars who were familiar with the performative artifice of the musical stage—people like Chevalier, Al Jolson, Jimmy Durante, and George M. Cohan—they introduced striking examples of how dialogue and song could be interwoven on film. In the end, their innovations would be largely overlooked as mainstream movie musicals headed in slightly different directions. Yet their attempts to structure a musical aesthetic for film can be taken as evidence of a wider culture in the studios of exploring not only the rhythmic qualities of speech, but the very musicality of performance.

## "In Between"

Garland's performance of "In Between" in *Love Finds Andy Hardy* (1938) offers a simple example of rhythmic dialogue being incorporated into a song.

"In Between" is a tweenage lament from a girl who yearns to reach adulthood. Betsy (Garland) is smitten with Andy (Rooney), though her love is unrequited, since he sees her as too young. The rhythmic dialogue appears in the middle two stanzas. First, Garland (as Betsy) speaks four lines of the stanza before coming back in with the song (▶ Video example 2.5):

BETSY: I'm allowed to go to picture shows
That is if nurse is feeling able.
But we only go to Mickey Mouse;
I'm not allowed Clark Gable.

In truth, these lines could be sung (the rest of the stanza is), and although they are spoken, their meter tracks the song's melody. In a sense, the delivery seems to wait for the music. In many ways, this is an appropriately simple device to work into the material, since it sounds and feels naive and childlike, emphasizing the subject matter of the song.

In the next verse (▶ Video example 2.6), the spoken section is extended to six lines before Betsy sings the refrain:

BETSY: My dad says I should bother more
About my lack of grammar;
The only thing that bothers me
Is my lack of glamour!
Why, if I use a lipstick and a powder puff,
Who knows, I might be Garbo, (in the rough)
*(Sings)* Instead of in-between!

The additional lines escalate noticeably in expression: they are pitched higher and louder, spoken more urgently, and emphasized in Garland's delivery. First, there are insistent stresses on the beats of the phrase, which heighten her sense of frustration; next, a rubato pay-off expresses her insecurity.

But it's also worth noting the transcription of Garland's speech patterns into music, which reveals that she constructs in her delivery a very effective musical sequence (Figure 2.3).

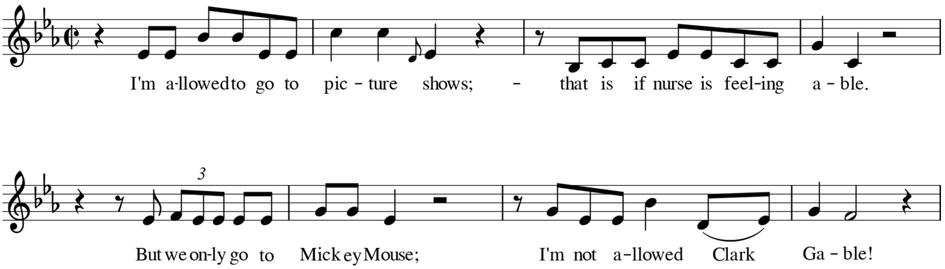
I'm a-llowed to go to pic - ture shows; - that is if nurse is feel-ing a - ble.
3
But we on-ly go to Mick ey Mouse; I'm not a-llowed Clark Ga - ble!

**FIGURE 2.3** Transcription of spoken lines from verse one of "In-Between," showing a very neat melodic and rhythmic pattern.

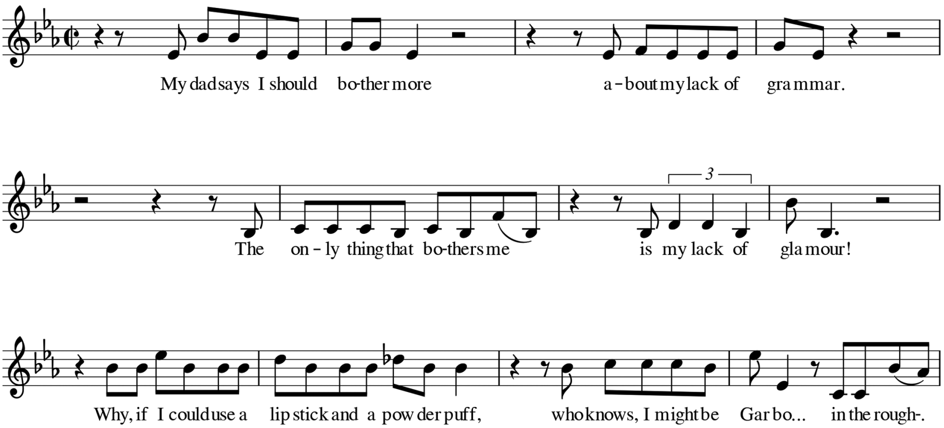
My dad says I should bo-ther more a-bout my lack of gra mmar.
The on-ly thing that bo-thers me is my lack of gla mour!
3
Why, if I could use a lip stick and a pow der puff, who knows, I might be Gar bo... in the rough-.

FIGURE 2.4 Transcription of spoken lines from verse two of "In-Between," showing Garland's instinctive use of a musical sequence.

Note how the first four bars set up a call-and-response pattern that is then closely mimicked in the second four bars. Since this is written to be rhythmic dialogue, we would expect the rhythm to be fairly tight, and it is; however, in addition to this, the consistency Garland brings to her patterning of the melody in this example indicates a fundamental musicality (Figure 2.4).

In the following spoken verse similar patterns can be seen, though Garland plays about with the third line by delaying her entry, allowing her to emphasize the joke at the end of the fourth line. In the fifth and sixth spoken lines she instinctively creates an attractive musical sequence, which picks out the first eighth note of each group and gradually cascades until she emphasizes "Garbo" with an octave leap (mimicking the leap in line four).

In these examples we see the early blossoming of expressive qualities (energy, pace, pitch, rhythm, and articulation) that would become staple features of Garland's characteristic acting style.

## "Could You Pass in Love" (1938)

It was not just in film that such textures were being explored; it was also on radio. One example is "Could You Pass in Love," written by Edens as a special sequence for the *Maxwell House Good News of 1939*. Garland performed it with Meredith Willson,[26] Frank Morgan,[27] and the host of the NBC show, Robert Young. This is a short scene, but one that is musically rather unusual in the extent that it incorporates the conceit of rhythmic dialogue as a feature of the skit. It juxtaposes passages of recitative with spoken dialogue and song throughout the opening verse, then develops into the main, sung refrain and subsequently introduces several stanzas of rhythmic dialogue between the verses.

Garland plays the role of a schoolteacher, testing her pupils in the art of love:

GARLAND: Mister Meredith Willson, if you're not too stupid,
Would you tell the class all about little man Cupid?
WILLSON: Well, well, I don't know but I think he was the kid who had a bow.
I don't know if it's true but I've heard it said,
He even shot an apple from his papa's head.

The dialogue is spoken to a clear rhythm throughout this sequence (▶ Video example 2.7), resembling a sort of rap. This sounds somewhat contrived, though she brings a lightness to her performance that makes the artifice work (according to the style of the 1930s). This may be associated with her experience of singing jazz, which often involved an overtly rhythmical scatting of lyric phrases and nonsense syllables. She'd developed a fine reputation as a singer of jazz or swing very early on, and her talent for this had already been seen in several movies in which she was featured as a lively young performer who would often jazz up a "legit" sound. In a number of these appearances she was explicitly pitched against legit singers such as Deanna Durbin—for example, "Waltz with a Swing / Americana" in *Every Sunday* (1936)—or Betty Jaynes, the "Broadway Rhythm" sequence of *Babes in Arms* (1939). She is also heard jazzing up Chopin in *Thoroughbreds Don't Cry* (1937) and Mendelssohn in *Everybody Sing* (1938).

In keeping with the popular spirit of the jazz style (if not her role as a teacher), her language in "Could You Pass in Love" is scattered with colloquial vocabulary and popular references:

GARLAND: At romance all you boys are punks
And in your tests on love you flunk.
As far as I'm concerned, I think you're loony;
You ought to take a class from Mickey Rooney.

Here she lifts away from the rigid rhythm of the music to make her dialogue more natural, although still declaimed in rhythm. Referencing Rooney is something of an in-joke, since Garland had just appeared with him in *Love Finds Andy Hardy* (1938).

The conceit of rhythmic dialogue remained a fashion of the 1930s. Though it never developed meaningfully from examples such as this, Garland continued to feature the style in later performances—extensively in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and throughout her career—especially in sequences invoking stage settings, such as the "Born in a Trunk" feature of *A Star Is Born* (1954).[28]

## INTERNAL MONOLOGUES

As mentioned, it was Roger Edens who masterminded opportunities for Judy to explore these possibilities. A good deal of their experimentation took place on radio broadcasts, and in particular on *Jack Oakie's College*, a weekly revue show on which she had a regular feature. The conceit of the program was to have Oakie play the president of a fictitious educational establishment. Many of the scenes took place in his office, and this allowed appearances from guests playing students or tutors dealing with college business. Garland featured as the college's singing sensation, appearing in the president's office to recruit new students or to discuss personal matters, and then leading the show's finale.

Edens adapted most of Garland's material for this show, and it was because of the program's dramatic conceit that he could play around with textures of song and dialogue. One approach he pioneered was for Judy to interrupt the straightforward rendition of her songs with speech, sometimes talking to the audience, sometimes with the principal, and sometimes launching into heartfelt monologues, all performed to a musical score.

A basic example of this is from the April 20, 1937, broadcast, in which she sings Irving Berlin's "Always" as a more-or-less stand-alone song. Between the sung verses she inserts a spoken commentary written in rhythmic dialogue (▶ Video example 2.8):

JUDY: *(Over music)* Did you ever stop to think
That the words of a song
Can bring us all cheer
When things go wrong
And I guess there's none of us who can't see
The value of philosophy, like . . .

*(Sings)* When the things you planned
Need a helping hand
I will understand
Always, always.[29]

In many ways, the structure of this interpolation is simple doggerel, and with its rhyming couplets, it invites the sort of rhythmic patterning that we have already explored. Nevertheless, in the broadcast, Garland resists that temptation, disguising the meter and the rhyme and delivering the couplets as "natural" speech.[30] She certainly manages to make the passage sound more natural than rhythmic dialogue, even if still slightly stilted.

Garland's delivery of this sort of in-between material would become more accomplished as the material itself complexified. Just a couple of weeks later, she performed the Gershwin song "They Can't Take That Away from Me" as part of an entire dramatic scene and with a lengthy conversation between the refrains.[31] In the scene, Judy is kept back by Professor Stoll to rehearse a number, in one sense, a simple excuse to perform a song. Stoll, that week's guest professor, a bandleader and jazz violinist, accompanies her with his orchestra and offers a lyrical counterpoint on his violin. As they conclude the first refrain, Stoll and Garland pick up a conversation. A piano underscores them.

Judy begins the conversation, admiring Stoll's concert performance from the previous night. She asks him for his photograph, admitting that she has a crush. The sequence becomes a lengthy monologue:

> All the girls have their crushes. And they pretend they have lovely rendezvous with them in magic gardens with fountains all around. Of course, it's all in the

> imagination . . . but it's awful romantic. You see—I sort of felt left behind, cause I didn't have a crush. And the girls started calling me a 'fraidy-cat and they double-dog-dared me to have a crush. So I said I would. But then the trouble was that I couldn't find anybody to have a crush on. That is—until—last night—when I heard you play at the concert—and then I knew that you were just the right one for me to have a crush on. That's why I'm here. I hope—you don't think I'm just a crazy kid. Do you?[32]

At this point, the monologue ends, and Stoll responds with a discreet rejection. They talk for a while longer, until Judy continues singing. Now the song is given resonance as an outpouring of her emotion rather than a rehearsal of the number. It's an elegantly structured vignette with a psychological justification for the final musical release.

Yet the simplicity of this encounter masks the complexity with which the material is handled, both in terms of its compositional structure and its live performance by Garland and Edens. Throughout the conversation and Judy's monologue, the underscore carefully contributes to the mood; and although Judy's scripted material appears to be delivered naturally and with little awareness of the music, she in fact performs her lines as a clever duet with the piano. For his part, Edens's arrangement of the music is fundamental to enabling the expressive impact of the scene.

The spoken material between the sung refrains is structured in three sections: conversation/monologue/conversation. The underscore develops from a solo piano to an orchestral sound. But the arrangement of the drama with the music has been carefully considered, and Garland and Edens are astute enough to sync particular lines with appropriate moments in the score. By using what seem like natural pauses and phonostylistics, Judy lands the laugh line of the first section absolutely at the moment the second iteration of the refrain begins ("Well—I want your picture, 'cause—'cause you're my crush," 2:38); she slows her delivery down at the end of the monologue to coincide with the introduction of strings to lift the intensity ("and then I knew that you were just the right one for me," 3:15); and as she concludes her monologue, the discernible beat of a new musical section begins, introducing a palm court foxtrot (and evoking, perhaps, "magic gardens with fountains all around," 3:26). Finally, her realization that the romance is not going to happen coincides with the final cadences of Edens's arrangement, and the recapitulation of the song. The effects are clever, though accomplished with such subtlety that audiences would barely notice the craft underpinning the scene. Ironically, the weakest moment is when the orchestra plays a formal, unnecessary introduction to the final refrain. Aside from that, the whole sequence is a master class in musicality, in which with unassuming ease the pianist and performer control their pace and energy to duet throughout the scene.

Garland's skill at negotiating a rather complex dramatic journey with such apparent effortlessness is something that has been noted by critics: "This uncanny ability, crafted in vaudeville, to go from the spoken word into song is the very basis for Garland's success in movie musicals," suggest Scott Brogan and Lawrence Schulman. "For her, there was no barrier between speech and song."[33] It was no surprise that the technique was therefore translated into her work in musical film.

## “I Cried for You” (1939)

Indeed, MGM encouraged the integration of different stylistic levels of address. For Arthur Freed, head of the MGM Freed Unit in which both Edens and Garland worked, “songs in film musicals should be part of the script itself, actually sung dialogue.”[34]

Halfway through *Babes in Arms* (which was filmed back-to-back with *The Wizard of Oz* as the first production of the Freed Unit), Garland’s character Patsy runs away from the community’s rehearsals. The kids of the town are putting on a show to raise money for their parents, aging vaudeville performers who have come upon hard times. But Patsy’s affections for the show’s director Mickey (Rooney) have been obstructed by the arrival of a glamorous stranger, Baby Rosalie. Faced with the competition of the talented newcomer, Patsy can’t compete, so she boards the night train to Schenectady and sings a wistful lament.

Harold Arlen’s song “I Cried for You” is written in ABA$^{1}$CA structure over forty measures. Garland as Patsy sings the refrain through once and then launches into a monologue to a photograph of Mickey underscored by the same material. As she comes to the end of the monologue, she sings the final sixteen bars in a repetition of the C and A sections.

This sequence is therefore a more contained unit than the musical scene incorporating “They Can’t Take That Away from Me.” Garland’s performance is presented in split-screen against a montage of Patsy’s memories from home, but her rendition of the song and monologue is recorded in a single take. This means that the timing of her monologue needs to be absolutely precise to enable her to transition smoothly into the final sections of sung material. Unlike the radio broadcasts—which were performed live, but which maintained a possibility of the pianist extemporizing to accommodate Garland’s speech—there is no room for compromise; and unlike the sequences of rhythmic dialogue we have seen, the monologue material is not obviously written to the meter of the music, meaning that Garland is apparently performing freestyle. Of course, the sequence runs perfectly, but it’s worth analyzing the material to gauge how Garland accomplished this complex timing.

Transcribing the monologue against the musical accompaniment helps to reveal its structure (Figure 2.5). Like the music, the scripted material has been broken into sections, even if those sections are not obvious from the words themselves.

| | |
|---|---|
| A (8 mm) | I know I’m no glamour girl like Baby—like her.<br>But maybe someday you’ll realize that glamour isn’t the only thing in this world. If your show’s a flop you’ll find you can’t eat glamour for breakfast. |
| B (8 mm) | Anyway, I might be pretty good-looking myself when I grow out of this ugly-duckling stage.<br>And you’re no Clark Gable yourself. But that’s all right. |
| A$^{1}$ (8 mm) | You go your way and I’ll go mine. Don’t worry about me, I’ll recover.<br>Time is a great healer. But in the future if we should meet again at the opera or at a ball, |

| | |
|---|---|
| A (8mm) | I know I'm no glamour girl like Baby - like her. |
| | But maybe someday you'll realize that glamour isn't the only thing in this world. If your show's a flop you'll find you can't eat glamour for breakfast. |
| B (8mm) | Anyway, I might be pretty good-looking myself when I grow out of this ugly-duckling stage. |
| | And you're no Clark Gable yourself. But that's all right. |
| $A^1$ (8mm) | You go your way and I'll go mine. Don't worry about me, I'll recover. |
| | Time is a great healer. But in the future if we should meet again at the opera or at a ball, |
| C (8mm) | and I'm dazzling in my diamonds and pearls and ermine wraps, and surrounded by lords and dukes and princes, |
| | you'll probably be sorry. And you'll probably realize that life is |
| A (8mm) | just an idiot's delight. And as I speed through the night into the abyss of oblivion, |
| | I can only say thanks - thanks for the memory. |

**FIGURE 2.5** Structural organization of the scripted monologue material from "I Cried for You," showing a close relationship with the musical structure of the song.

C (8 mm) and I'm dazzling in my diamonds and pearls and ermine wraps, and surrounded by lords and dukes and princes,
you'll probably be sorry. And you'll probably realize that life is
A (8 mm) just an idiot's delight. And as I speed through the night into the abyss of oblivion,
I can only say thanks—thanks for the memory.

In fact, this structuring is rather sophisticated. Each of the sections can be broken down into two parts (as they are in Garland's delivery). The initial A, B, and $A^1$ start with fairly succinct statements, followed by extensions of each thought. The pair of comments in Section A and Section $A^1$ (both accompanied by the same music) are based on the same principle: Garland makes a short, rational observation, and then follows it with an emotional tirade. In the first A section, she acknowledges that she cannot compete with Baby Rosalie (then launches into hyperbole); in the second, she assertively breaks off their romance (and again launches into hyperbole). The Section A material, marked musically by the dominant theme of the song, is also marked dramatically as the "home" territory of Garland's thoughts. In Section $A^1$ the surety of that position is also indicated by her speech pattern as she makes her assertion in three sharp statements ("You go your

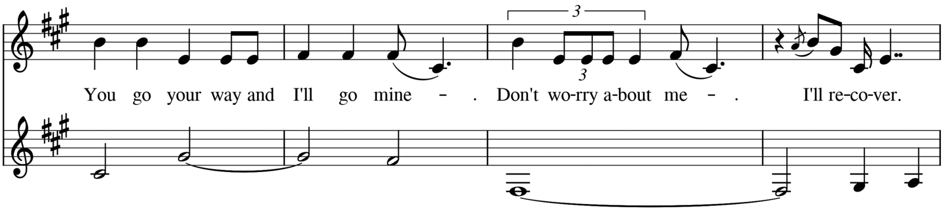
3
3
You go your way and I'll go mine - . Don't wo-rry a-bout me - . I'll re-co-ver.

**FIGURE 2.6** Transcription of opening bars of Section A$^1$ of the internal monologue of "I Cried for You," showing Garland's recurring intonation over three associated thought-statements.

way and I'll go mine. Don't worry about me, I'll recover"). In her performance, Garland emphasizes these thoughts by pitching them as variations of the same melodic theme, each a slight reduction of the last (Figure 2.6; ▶ Video example 2.9).

Section B inverts the rational/irrational principle of the A material (moving from an irrational to a rational statement), which is appropriate for the second-subject material. This responds to the opening A statements before returning to the territory of home.

But rather than following the same journey when the A material is recapped, the Section A$^1$ iteration does not proceed to the B theme; instead, new material is introduced that takes a flight of fancy in both music and thought (Section C). Eventually, Garland pauses and takes stock. As she returns to the rationality of Section A and the recap of the main theme, she lands the dramatic punchline of the speech, which is emphasized by familiar musical material ("just an idiot's delight"; effectively, "I have been an idiot"). It's a shrewd compositional device to emphasize the point. As a coda, the final A section mirrors the first to conclude Garland's emotional journey, with a short burst of overindulgence before the final resolution of the monologue's last line.

The monologue is therefore carefully composed in line with the motivation of the musical material. In performance, Garland's delivery follows the steer of the composition, stating the rational thoughts more deliberately, but then scampering through her emotional outbursts. At the same time, both she and the solo underscore jazz the rigidity of the music, stretching the meter at times, and pulling back at others, enjoying their duet. It is a controlled performance that must have been carefully rehearsed, revealing a sophisticated handling of the sort of musicality that I have been exploring (energy, pace, pitch, rhythm, and articulation).

## "You Made Me Love You (Dear Mr. Gable)" (1937)

But it is in "You Made Me Love You (Dear Mr. Gable)" that Garland's monologue performance becomes particularly effective. The sequence very closely parallels her contemporaneous recording of "They Can't Take That Away From Me," though in this instance, Garland expresses her infatuation with a photograph of Clark Gable, rather than her professor of music. Perhaps the most obvious thing to note is the stylistic distinction between the sung sections (mediated through the act of writing a letter, and therefore pitched as more formal), and the spoken section (addressed directly to his photograph and therefore implied to be more personal).

What makes "You Made Me Love You" stand out is the fact that not only does Garland duet with the pace and energy of the underscore, and not only does she control the timing of the monologue by fashioning its delivery around the structure of the song, but she also aligns the pitch of her performance to the tuning of the orchestra, making her speech effectively a melodic instrumental counterpoint.

In fairness, Garland had partly done this in "I Cried for You," whose tonal palette is all related to the key of the number. We've also seen how her melodramatic pastiche in *Thoroughbreds Don't Cry* was pitched in a consistent key. Still, the musicality of that melodrama was guided by the artifice of the pastiche, and "I Cried for You" is relatively straightforward in that it maintains its tonal center. "You Made Me Love You" modulates harmonically into different areas, yet Garland is able to navigate the implications of that tonal journey throughout the musical delivery of her speech.

The structure of the song is ABA$^1$C—similar to "I Cried for You," though without a concluding A section. Unlike the former's short sequences of paired thoughts, "You Made Me Love You" builds a single, extended through-line from the start of the speech, enabling Garland to duet with the phrasing of the entire song. This is long-form (or at least, thirty-two-bar rather than eight-bar) duetting, which culminates in the dynamic lift out of speech and back into song.

Meanwhile, the monologue is structured as a single thought ("I don't wanna bother you [. . . but . . .] you're my favorite actor") textured with three internal waves (similar to Rooney's earlier speech example) (see Figure 2.7).

Each of the waves recounts a moment in which Garland's character has encountered Gable—in "It Happened One Night"; then in a picture with Joan Crawford; and then in person—and as she recounts these anecdotes, she becomes increasingly excited, extending them each time. In this monologue the hints of rational thought are limited to the very beginning ("Guess you get a lot of girls tell you the same thing") and close to the end ("I was in the way"); throughout the rest of the speech Garland is breathless, and her remembrances rush into one another without ever seeming to stop for air.

On the other hand, there is a dynamic pattern to her outpouring: the first encounter is delivered in short phrases and reasonably measured over around six bars of the music; the second accelerates in tempo and condenses the regularity of the phrases to occupy about five bars; and the third tumbles through its opening statements in just two

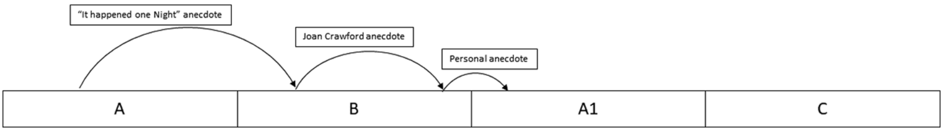

FIGURE 2.7 Diagram showing the wavelike structure of Garland's monologue against the musical structure of the score in "You Made Me Love You (Dear Mr. Gable)."

bars before Garland pulls herself up. Now, she alternates between excitable, emotional explosions ("Oh, but it wasn't your fault"; "Yeah, you smiled right at me as if you meant it"), and singular statements of fact ("No, I was in the way"; "But you looked at me"; "And you smiled"). In terms of musical expression, these are phrased with, respectively, extreme melodic variation and a rather restricted tonal range (Figure 2.8; ▶ Video example 2.10).

We've noticed before how Garland's sense of timing her monologues to the music has been impeccable; and this is no exception, especially since, as James Fisher reports, the monologue was recorded live on set.[35] However, in this instance, the long-form delivery of her thoughts allows her no easy solution to monitoring her progress; she is not delivering a line for every four-bar phrase. Indeed, it's a sign of the sophistication of this performance that she is able to jazz her own phrasing against that of the music, even more than she did in "I Cried for You." Needless to say, she segues seamlessly into song at the end of the speech in every recording, demonstrating the careful precision with which she performs.

What makes it more complicated than "I Cried for You" is the way that both the B section and the second A section modulate away from the song's initial tonal material. "You Made Me Love You" is performed in A major, and the opening eight bars broadly follows a tonic-dominant chordal pattern (A major / E major). That is interrupted when the B section introduces an F# major / B major pattern, thereby coloring the tonal complexity with major thirds of those keys, A#s and D#s. The return to the tonic is facilitated by a cycle of fourths (F#–B–E–A), enabling the second A section to reiterate the opening bars. Once again, though, the palette is disrupted when this variation pulls the texture toward C# major, colored with E#s. A further cycle of fourths takes the song back to the tonic (C#–F#–B–E–A), meaning that there is a satisfactory resolution, but one that has had to negotiate some interesting harmonic moments.

But the most impressive aspect of Garland's performance of this number is that she is able to follow the modulations of the song in her speech patterns, slipping effectively between the modalities of the changing palette. First, she moves into a modality of F# major during the B section ("not 'til the end of the picture anyway"); then, toward the

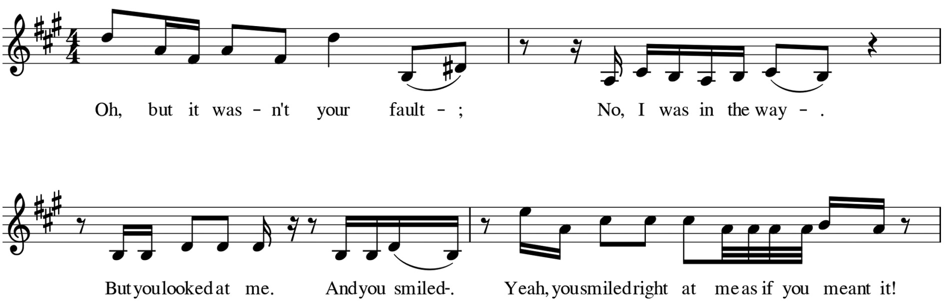
Oh, but it was - n't your fault - ;
No, I was in the way - .
Butyoulookedat me.
Andyou smiled-.
Yeah,yousmiledright at meas if you meant it!

**FIGURE 2.8** Transcription showing melodic variation in Garland's delivery of the "You Made Me Love You" monologue, alternating melodic expression with stulted monotone.

end of the song she slips into a modality of C# major ("just 'cause you smiled at me") (Figure 2.9; Video example 2.11).

In short, Garland speaks in tune with the music, and seems to do this effortlessly. As it happens, the lines marked by these modulations are also dramatically poignant. Thus the combined skills of Edens's arrangement and Garland's performance deliver a perfectly crafted musical and dramatic sequence, a wonderful example of her masterly control.

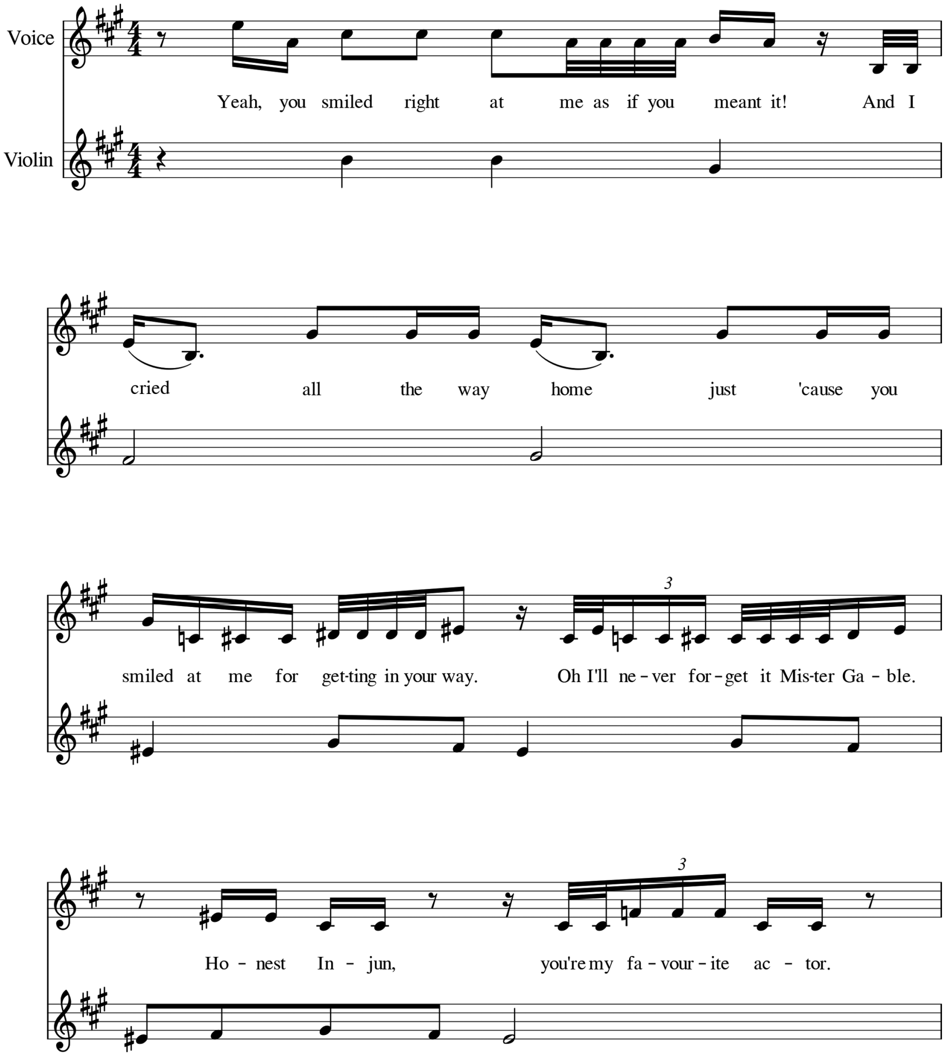
Voice
Violin
Yeah, you smiled right at me as if you meant it! And I
cried all the way home just 'cause you
smiled at me for get-ting in your way. Oh I'll ne - ver for - get it Mis-ter Ga - ble.
3
Ho - nest In - jun, you're my fa - vour - ite ac - tor.
3

**FIGURE 2.9** Transcription of second modulatory moment in "You Made Me Love You" during the second A section, in which Garland duets with the violin and effectively changes key from a tonal palette of E major to C# major to match the modulation of the music.

## Musicality in Speech

Most of the examples considered so far have explored Garland’s musicality in spoken sections within or around songs. However, to conclude this analysis I’d like to investigate how her musicalization techniques filtered into the texture of spoken scenes. Where better to look for these than in a film from the end of this short period of experimentation—the very film in which Rooney credits her with such a musical ability: “Because you sing when you talk”?

About halfway through *Babes on Broadway* (55:44), Rooney’s character Tommy is put on the back foot when he thoughtlessly dismisses the plight of the children for whom he and Penny are trying to arrange a benefit. Penny buries herself in her office work as Tommy tries to level with her. “What’s the matter,” she asks; “Did you run out of speeches?” When he replies, “Now you’re making me feel pretty awful,” Penny makes a speech of her own, and in this, we can hear Garland’s development of a musical voice coming to fruition.

A transcription of the speech shows just how far it is structured as a musical sequence Figure 2.10; ▶ Video example 2.12): it is clearly centered on an F-major tonality, and it can be broken into four distinct sections and thus into ABCD form.

The first section (mm. 1–3) introduces a theme and its response (“Well you shouldn’t. You’re getting everything you want”). Both in terms of its meter and its melody, this sequence is balanced. Aside from a leading anacrusis, the pattern of the overall phrase starts and ends on the same pitch, opening with an interval from A to F, and closing with an inversion of the same interval. Then comes the most clearly musicalized section (mm. 4–10): three call-and-response phrases that extend both the thematic trope of her argument and the length and range of the musical material (“First, you wanted a cause; well, you got it”; “Then, you wanted a showcase; well, you got that too”; “Then, you wanted to get to Broadway; well you’re going to get there”). The rhythmical repetition of the first part of each phrase really consolidates the pattern as a musical sequence, and the answering motifs offer comparable melodic shapes characterized by a step up and a dropping interval (“well, you got”; “well, you got”; “you’re gonna”). The C section (mm. 11–12) provides the most strident departure from the musical root, both melodically and rhythmically; and as it happens, the focus of her thought in this section also introduces a thematic excursus from the topic of success (“Course, you may knock over a few people and climb over them but . . . you’re gonna get there”). Finally, Section D (mm. 13–15) returns to a basic theme and response, weaving in the recurring musical motif of a falling sixth (F–A again). The speech has a very effective rhetorical structure, but it is amply aided in its impact by Garland’s clearly musicalized delivery.

Of course, this is just one example, though I could have turned to other sequences in this film such as Penny’s first appearance in the diner (from 14:40), her conversation with Barbara-Jo about Tommy (from 42:21), or her appeal to theatrical producer Thornton Reed at the end of the movie (from 1:42:14). Equally, many of Garland’s later

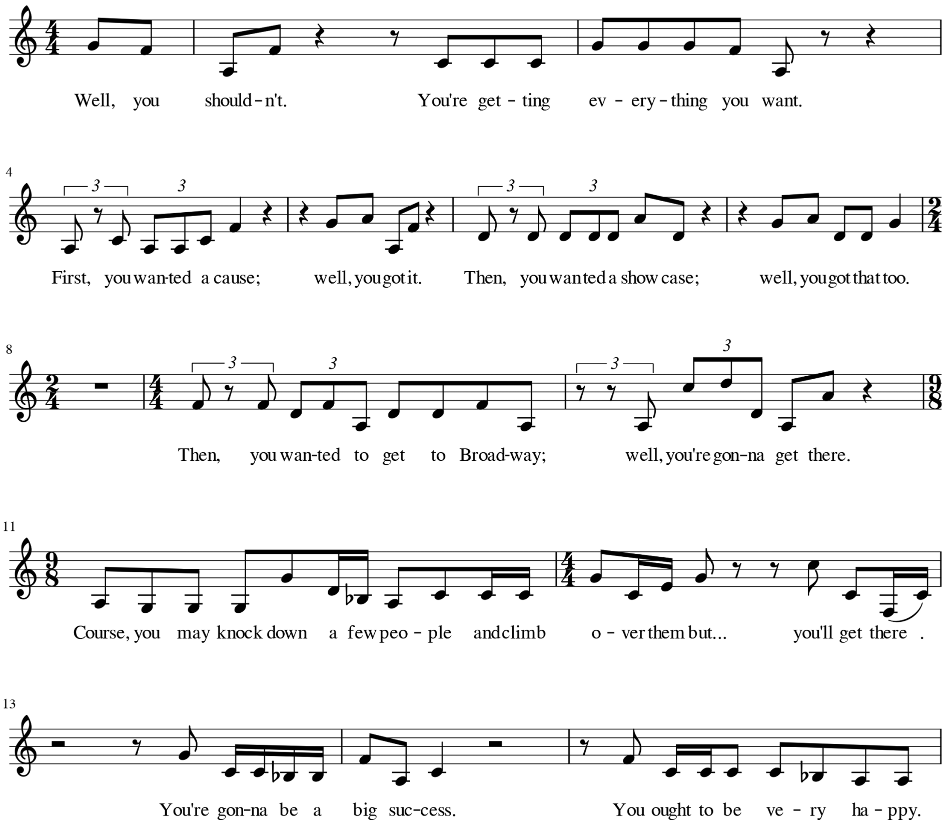
Well, you should - n't. You're get - ting ev - ery - thing you want.
4
First, you wan-ted a cause; well, you got it. Then, you wanted a show case; well, you got that too.
8
Then, you wan-ted to get to Broad-way; well, you're gon-na get there.
11
Course, you may knock down a few peo - ple and climb o - ver them but... you'll get there .
13
You're gon-na be a big suc-cess. You ought to be ve - ry ha - ppy.

FIGURE 2.10 Penny's speech from *Babes on Broadway*, demonstrating Garland's command of a musicalized delivery.

performances reveal similar patterns of musicality, reflecting the maturing confidence of the growing movie star.

But perhaps Garland's extraordinary ability to shape her vocal performance ironically represents something else: a hidden protest against the studio that so famously controlled her. Much has been written about the demands of the studio system on young performers, especially in relation to Garland, whose activities, relationships, appearance, and dietary regime were all determined by the studio heads.[36] To many subsequent commentators, the control exerted by the studio on someone so young and impressionable bordered on abuse. Yet for all that she suffered at the hands of the studio, and for all the trauma that was caused by the constant monitoring of her physical and aesthetic appeal, Garland's subtle way of owning what was captured on film marks a significant and empowering reclamation of her own expressive control. Her mastery of musicality—supported by the complicity of Roger Edens—gave her authority over her performance, enabling her to reclaim agency over her voice and body, and ultimately, power over her persona. Thanks to that agency, her lasting legacy was something that Garland could keep subtly out of reach of the studio bosses and their relative musical ignorance, even while the enigmatic talent of her voice was openly displayed in her performances, claimed as an MGM asset, and celebrated by audiences. Perhaps it is because we can sense this hidden power in her performances that Garland remains such a beloved and iconic figure today.[37]

## NOTES

1. Garland also appeared in two non-musical features, *The Clock* (1945) and *A Child Is Waiting* (1963), and a number of shorts.
2. Gerold Frank, *Judy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).
3. Adrienne L. McLean, "Feeling and the Filmed Body: Judy Garland and the Kinesics of Suffering," *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2002): 2–15.
4. Richard Dyer, "*A Star Is Born* and the Construction of Authenticity," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), 132–141.
5. Ciara Barrett, "'Just a Voice and Youth': Shirley Temple, Deanna Durbin, Judy Garland and the Rise of the Musical Child Star in the 1930s," in *Childhood and Celebrity*, ed. Jane O'Connor and John Mercer (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 41–52.
6. Barrett, "Just a Voice," 49–51.
7. Mickey Rooney, *Life Is Too Short* (New York: Villard Books, 1991), 97.
8. W. E. Oliver, "12 Year Old Girl Is Sensation at Frolics," *Los Angeles Evening Express*, December 8, 1934.
9. Rooney, *Life Is Too Short*, 101.
10. Judy Garland, "My Story," as told to Michael Drury, *Cosmopolitan*, January 1951.
11. Garland, "My Story."
12. The film was re-released in 1941 with the new title *Forgotten Hero*.
13. Rooney, *Life Is Too Short*, 110.
14. James L. Neibaur, *The Essential Mickey Rooney* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 25.
15. Rooney, *Life Is Too Short*, 123, referring to *Boys Town* (1938). His overblown displays in emotional scenes seem somewhat mannered; even his well-respected performance in *Boys Town* (1938) comes across as melodramatic by today's standards. Meanwhile, the final scene in *Hoosier Schoolboy* (1937) seems awkward to a contemporary audience.
16. Rooney, *Life Is Too Short*, 161, referring to *Young Tom Edison* (1940).
17. Rooney, *Life Is Too Short*, 143, referring to *Babes in Arms* (1939). Elsewhere, he reflects more somberly ("Good acting, for me, was learning to accept my own individuality, learning how to be myself. I don't think I could have learned that by going to an acting school"). Rooney, *Life Is Too Short*, 110.
18. Rooney, *Life Is Too Short*, 143.
19. Tommy's impromptu speech to the audience of their final show when it has to be canceled (1:36:55) is notably absent of rhetoric, and therefore comes across as appropriately deflated; moments later, back in the dressing room, his rhetoric returns: "Faith, hope and charity. Well you can take those three kids and wrap them in cellophane and give them back to the Indians. From now on, it's the old rules for me. I'm gonna get a chance again. When I do, look out brother. Because I'm gonna take anything from anybody, any time, any place."

20. Hugh Fordin, *MGM's Greatest Musicals: The Arthur Freed Unit* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 6.
21. Philip Furia, *The Songs of Hollywood* (New York: Oxford University Press (2010), 131.
22. Fordin, *MGM's Greatest Musicals*, 6.
23. For a brief discussion of this see Dominic Symonds, *We'll Have Manhattan: The Early Work of Rodgers and Hart* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 256–258, 262–263.
24. Quoted in Fredrick Nolan, *Lorenz Hart: A Poet on Broadway* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 159.
25. Quoted in Nolan, *Lorenz Hart*, 159.
26. It's worth mentioning Willson's own exploration of rhythmic dialogue in his subsequent writing, in particularly the number "Ya Got Trouble" from *The Music Man* (1957). Willson wrote about his inception of this idea in one of his autobiographical accounts, in which he emphasized an innate rhythmicality in the structures of dramatic speech: "I want to have an underlying unsuspected rhythm underneath the dialogue when I'm ready for a song, like a cable running underneath Powell Street—then I can hook onto it any time I wish without the audience realizing it." Meredith Willson, *But He Doesn't Know the Territory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1959] 2013), 44.
27. Frank Morgan would go on to play opposite Garland as the Wizard in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).
28. Raymond Knapp alludes to some of this material in his chapter in this volume.
29. William Esty, "Jack Oakie's College Program no. 17Y" (radio script), April 20, 1937, Columbia Broadcasting System, 29. Truth Tobacco Industry Documents 370420, https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/tobacco/docs/#id=mkgc0079. Accessed November 21, 2019.
30. The recording can be heard on *Judy Garland: Lost Tracks 2, 1936–1967*, JSP Records, JSP4247 (2019).
31. The recording can be heard on *Judy Garland: Lost Tracks, 1929–1959*, JSP Records, JSP965 (2010).
32. William Esty, "Jack Oakie's College Program no. 19" (radio script), May 4, 1937, Columbia Broadcasting System, 14. Truth Tobacco Industry Documents ykgc0079, https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/ykgc0079. Accessed November 21, 2019.
33. Scott Brogan and Lawrence Schulman, "The Decca Test Records," www.thejudyroom.com. Accessed October 23, 2019.
34. A. Johnson, "Conversation with Roger Edens," *Sight and Sound* 27 (1958): 179–182.
35. James Fisher, "Judy Garland: Lost Tracks 2, 1936–1967," *ARSC Journal* 50, no. 1 (2019): 157–159, 170.
36. As mentioned previously, see Frank 1975; Dyer 1991; Mclean 2002; see also David Shipman, *Judy Garland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993). Such control was exercised not only over Garland, but also over other young performers, especially if they were female. For an account of how Garland's contemporary Hedy Lamarr, for example, was similarly controlled, see Stephen Michael Shearer, *Beautiful: The Life of Hedy Lamarr* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2010).
37. I'm grateful to Dominic Broomfield-McHugh and Raymond Knapp for their valuable feedback on the initial draft of this essay.

## CHAPTER 3

# REVEALING THE SUBCONSCIOUS

## *The Dream Ballet in Movie Musicals*

### KARA GARDNER

*Oklahoma!*, the classic Broadway musical, made its way to the Hollywood screen in 1955. At a pivotal moment in the film, its heroine Laurey, drinks a dose of a "magical elixir" and falls asleep just as she considers which young man to take to the box social. Her dream reveals her fears and desires to an audience who would otherwise see her only as a sweet girl with a choice to make between two suitors. Her subconscious feelings gain expression through dance in the choreography of Agnes de Mille. Although other Hollywood film sequences before and after it explored dreams and fantasies through movement, the dance that represents Laurey's dream in *Oklahoma!* came to exemplify the "dream ballet" genre.

A "dream ballet" uses ballet technique as its stylistic language, although it might incorporate other choreographic styles. Movement is its primary medium of expression, as opposed to dialogue or song. The dream ballet focuses on the subconscious feelings and motivations of a main character. Dance often serves the function of lifting the audience outside of the main film narrative into another realm. But the dream ballet does this while also facilitating the development of a character who plays an important part in the main story. The dream ballet emerged during a period in which Freudian analysis captured the popular imagination, especially in the artistic circles of New York and Hollywood. While there are many well-known fantasy sequences that use dance to tell stories during this era, only a few examples with true fidelity to the generic constraints of the dream ballet exist in Hollywood films. Still, a close analysis of dream ballets in film musicals provides insights into the ways choreographers and directors use dance to shape the overall stories. Dream ballets also reveal telling information about perceptions of gender during the eras in which they were produced.

*An American in Paris* (1951), *Oklahoma!* (1955), and *La La Land* (2016) all contain dance sequences that serve as useful case studies to examine the genre of the "dream ballet." *An American in Paris* (1951) and *Oklahoma!* (1955) were both produced during a time when the fascination with Freud's theories reached a peak. *La La Land*'s twenty-first-century popularity indicates that the dream ballet still appeals to audiences, even while it also serves as a nostalgic gesture to the past. The dream ballets in these three films make overt use of balletic technique or style, although in *La La Land*, the choreography is relatively simple because the film's lead actors (Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling) perform it, and they lack dance training. And each ballet reveals the subconscious motivations of a main character whose inner thoughts are given expression through the medium of dance. *Oklahoma!*'s dream ballet adapts the stage version for the screen, and it therefore exemplifies the elements of the genre that de Mille made definitive in 1943.[1] The *Oklahoma!* dream ballet focuses on the motivations of the female protagonist, Laurey. The choreography emphasizes Laurey's central conflict—the fact that her love for Curly is threatened by her fascination with Jud's dangerous and dark sexuality. De Mille's portrayal of Laurey's hidden sexual desires resonated with the postwar interest in Freud and brought to light aspects of femininity that her collaborators never considered.[2] In *An American in Paris*, Gene Kelly choreographs and dances the lead role in a dream ballet that depicts the inner world of a male artist. He uses the medium of dance to reveal the feelings of a man who struggles to reconcile his role as an artist with the expectations of masculinity that were prevalent in the 1950s. Kelly plays a World War II veteran and expatriate painter, Jerry Mulligan, who is trying to make a name for himself in Paris. Mulligan falls in love with a mysterious girl, Lise (played by ballet dancer Leslie Caron), while also pursuing an ambiguous relationship with his female patron, an heiress named Milo Roberts. The dream ballet brings the film to a close and reveals Jerry's feelings about his attempts to find love and success. The dream sequence that brings *La La Land* to a close focuses on the feelings of Mia Dolan, the female protagonist. It occurs after Mia and her lover Sebastian have separated and she has married someone else. The dream sequence reveals aspects of Mia's subconscious feelings that we do not see at any other point in the film. *La La Land*'s collaborators invoke classic Hollywood musicals, particularly *An American in Paris*, throughout the film, and the dream sequence pays tribute to Gene Kelly's landmark work. It serves as a twenty-first-century example to compare and contrast with earlier dream ballets, both in terms of its style and its depiction of gender roles.

The dream ballets in *An American in Paris*, *Oklahoma!*, and *La La Land* share an important thematic tie with the balletic tradition—the marriage plot. Feminist dance historian Sally Banes argues that throughout the history of both ballet and modern dance, women characters find themselves "enmeshed" in the "marriage plot."[3] Banes points out that ballet had its origins at royal weddings during the early modern period in Europe. Ballets represent the marriage plot in a variety of ways depending on their cultural and historical contexts and the perspectives of their choreographers. These three ballets are no exception. The concept of marriage receives different treatment in the three works. Kelly's dream ballet views marriage from a male lens. When Jerry begins his dream, he has just discovered that Lise is engaged to someone else, making her unavailable. Throughout the ballet, he keeps trying to capture Lise, but she eludes him. De Mille's ballet tells the woman's side of the story. Banes argues that "the choice of a marriage partner can be seen as standing metaphorically for women's agency in general."[4] This argument applies in compelling ways to Laurey's dream, which becomes a nightmare of rape, murder, and complete loss of agency. Finally, Mandy Moore's ballet in *La La Land* shows Mia imagining a marriage that might have been, and the audience is left to wonder whether her real path or her imagined path would make her happier. Perhaps this lack of closure represents Moore's twenty-first-century response to the marriage plot.

In this essay, I lay the groundwork for in-depth analysis of the three dream ballets with a broader discussion of dance in early Hollywood musicals. First, I discuss ballet and its relationship to sexuality in the dances of Busby Berkeley and George Balanchine. Then I briefly summarize Freud's reception in America, describing how psychoanalysis overtook Hollywood, particularly in the post–World War II era. With this historical context established, I analyze two examples of fantasy dance sequences in film musicals—"Broadway Melody" from *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and "Girl Hunt Ballet" from *The Band Wagon* (1953). These dances, which are likely familiar to many readers, serve as contrasting examples that do not conform to my generic definition of the dream ballet, although they share many of its features. And finally, I provide close readings of the three dream ballets that are the primary focus of the essay. I look at how the ballets tell stories in unique ways, reflect the perspectives of their choreographers, and reveal aspects of the cultures that produced them.

## BALLET IN THE EARLY HOLLYWOOD MUSICAL

What does dance achieve in a movie musical that music and dialogue do not? What can the story told in a dance add to the overall narrative of the film? It is the job of the choreographer to answer those questions, in collaboration with the director. Dancers can communicate things in a visceral way that transcend the limitations of verbal expression. On film, close-up shots allow dancers to convey meaning through facial expression that might not be visible to the audience in a stage production. The camera can also adopt a removed perspective, filming bodies as they interact from a distance, focusing on abstract shapes and tableaux. Movement can therefore be intimate or emotionally removed; it can be dazzling or subtle. Whatever its function, it removes viewers from realism. We don't generally break into dance as part of our day-to-day interactions. In movie musicals, dance typically functions either as overt entertainment for its own sake, or as a diversion into fantasy that tells us something we would not otherwise know about the characters it portrays.

In their book *No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century*, Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick argue that putting dance on film has many challenges:

> If the "lifelike" sound of [dancers'] breathing or the noise of their feet on the floor or extraneous sounds like the rustle of fabric are missing, the dynamics of effort and kinetic contrasts that give live dancing its immediacy may be missing as well . . . And in the ballet, with its convention of concealed effort, dancers may resemble puppets—every gesture deprived of lifeblood.[5]

With the "lifelike" aspects of dance removed on film, choreographers and directors rely on other elements of movement to make an impact on the audience.

In the 1930s, Busby Berkeley became known for his creation of jaw-dropping dance sequences that gave Depression-era audiences some respite when they entered the theater. He shot his numbers on large sets using the overt intervention of the camera to create entertaining tricks for the eye. He used the uniform bodies of young white women to create abstract shapes (see Figure 3.1). Berkeley's girls wore surprisingly revealing costumes for the era, and his choreography was often uninhibited. For example, in *Footlight Parade* (1933), he created a human waterfall with his dancers and

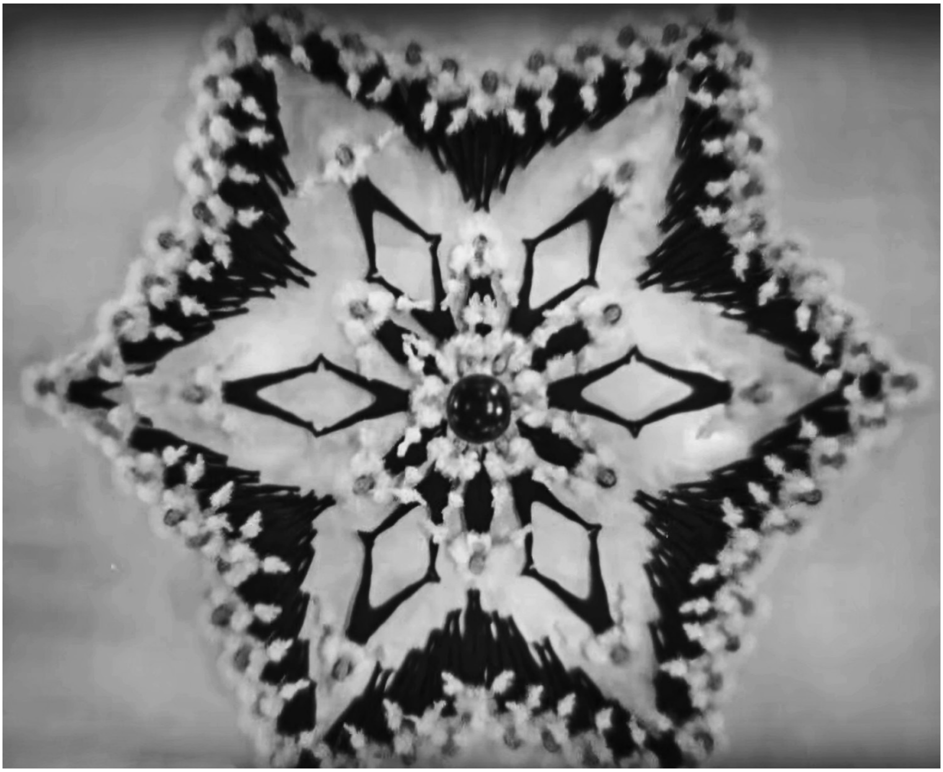

**FIGURE 3.1** Busby Berkeley, *Dames*. Warner Bros., 1934.

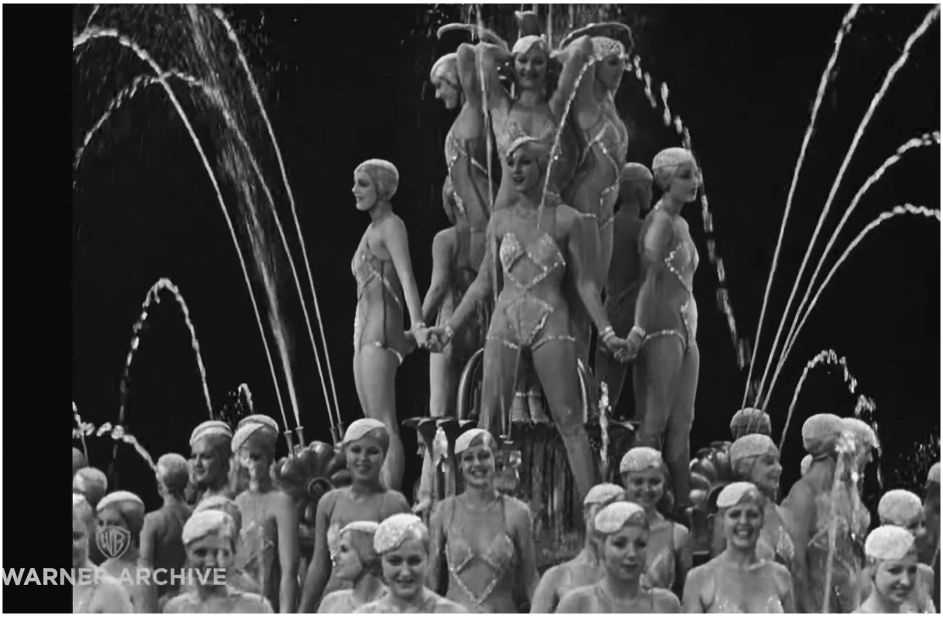

**FIGURE 3.2** Busby Berkeley, Human Waterfall, *Footlight Parade*. Warner Bros., 1933.

water erupted around them in not-very-subtle imitations of climax (see Figure 3.2). Berkeley had no interest in developing the characters of the nameless girls who appeared in his choruses. His dances served as diversions and called attention to his creative use of a suspended overhead camera, or his tight control over the movement of many bodies to serve an abstract purpose. He used the technology of the film medium to create effects similar to those feats of athleticism and coordination that define the kickline on stage.

George Balanchine is primarily known as a ballet choreographer and the founder of the New York City Ballet. He also loved the beautiful girls and the youthful optimism of Hollywood. For a man who fled Russia in 1924 as a result of the Russian Revolution, Los Angeles seemed like paradise.[6] Between 1936 and 1954, Balanchine traveled between the East and West Coasts of the United States, creating dances for twenty Broadway productions and five Hollywood films.[7] In 1938, Samuel Goldwyn hired him to choreograph *The Goldwyn Follies*. Initially, Balanchine planned a lengthy ballet using the score for George Gershwin's *An American in Paris*, but Goldwyn feared it was too sophisticated for rural audiences. They replaced it with Balanchine's "Water Nymph Ballet," featuring Vera Zorina, who would later become his wife. The nymph emerges magically from the water, performs a pas de deux, and then retreats back. There is very little emotional connection between the nymph and her partner, and the dancing lacks the control and virtuosity that defined Balanchine's stage work. But he does use the camera to create memorable visual effects. For example, Balanchine uses Zorina's flexibility and the water's reflective surface to create the sense that the nymph and the lake share a material essence (see Figure 3.3). Balanchine also exploits the camera in his film version

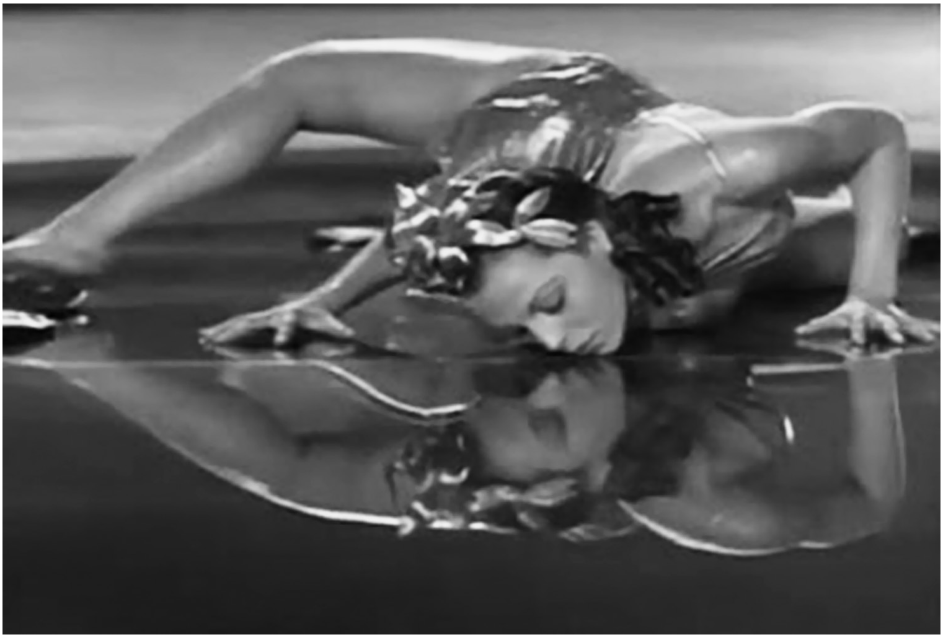

**FIGURE 3.3** George Balanchine, Water Nymph Ballet (Vera Zorina), *The Goldwyn Follies*, United Artists, Samuel Goldwyn Productions, 1938.

of the "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" ballet from *On Your Toes* (1939). Zorina, a dance hall girl, performs a jazzy pas de deux with a customer in her club. They get interrupted by the entrance of her jealous boyfriend, a mob boss. Balanchine plays with perspective as the dance comes to a close, first capturing the boss's view of Zorina through the legs of her partner, and then an upside-down view of the boss from Zorina's perspective. The dance ends with a tableau representing the dangerous and violent love triangle. (See ▶ Video example 3.1.) Balanchine's approach was a kind of hybrid that combined an awareness of the camera and what it could offer with a keen sense of the drama offered by romance and relationships between men and women. Balanchine's dances immerse the viewer and his tableaux remain visually memorable, but he does not develop characters with much depth in his Hollywood dances.

When compared with Berkeley and Balanchine, Fred Astaire came closer to capturing the intimacy and physical immediacy of stage dancing on film in his partnership with Ginger Rogers. Astaire set out to integrate their duets into the larger stories of their films, which included *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), *Top Hat* (1935), and *Swing Time* (1936). Rogers and Astaire rarely played love scenes in dialogue. Instead, their romantic relationships developed through dance. In 1937, Astaire told a reporter, "Each dance ought to spring somehow out of a character or situation."[8] Unlike Berkeley and Balanchine, he intentionally shot the dances so that the camera faded into the background. Sequences "were photographed without interruption by one to three cameras placed at eye level and at a distance that framed the dancing figures tightly from head to toe."[9] This allowed audiences to focus on the dancing as opposed to the camera work or the editing, and perhaps replicate the feeling they might have if they were watching the dancers in a live theater. The camera did have some advantages. Unlike in stage productions where the audience sits at a distance from the dancers, moviegoers could observe and admire intricate movements. Facial expressions could also convey emotion. Astaire and Rogers's dances charmed audiences because of the genuine, human connection they conveyed, rather than technical effects. They played an integral part in the larger stories because they exposed the emotional connection between the male and female protagonists. However, they generally did not delve into the subconscious desires of either character.

## Sex, Freud, and the Movies

Many Hollywood dance sequences in the 1930s made overt sexual references. Populated with young female dancing bodies wearing surprisingly little, the dances belied a new sense of sexual freedom in the United States. For a country with a Puritan history still emerging from the Victorian era, the movies pushed the boundaries of propriety. In this period, across many forms of cultural expression, sexuality began to emerge as a more common theme. Psychoanalyst A. A. Brill observed, "Times have really changed, sexually speaking . . . the scientific and more liberal-minded people of metropolitan regions are becoming distinctly more honest and outspoken in their attitude to sex."[10] Berkeley's dance sequences make playful phallic references, and Balanchine's dances exploit the newfound sexual freedom of the jazz era. But it was not until the late 1930s and early 1940s that the popular fascination with Freud began to make its influence felt on dance numbers in Hollywood musicals.

Freud first came to the United States in 1909 for a series of lectures. Gradually, his theories began to take hold, particularly his "emphasis on the importance of sexuality, childhood, and the role of the unconscious."[11] Psychologists began applying disparate interpretations of Freud's theories to treat their patients in the decades following the introduction of his work in America, and many of those patients were wealthy intellectuals. Several writers, choreographers, and directors who explored character development through dreams had exposure to psychoanalysis. Moss Hart, book writer for the musical *Lady in the Dark* which premiered on Broadway in 1941, worked with psychiatrist Lawrence S. Kubie from 1937 until his retirement in 1959.[12] Agnes de Mille sought treatment from the German Jewish refugee Hilde Maas when she was in London in the late 1930s. Struggling to cope with two failed romantic relationships and the divorce of her parents, de Mille looked back to her childhood to explore the things she felt were preventing her from achieving success. Gene Kelly did not undergo psychoanalysis, but his daughter Kerry Kelly Novick, who became a psychoanalyst in her adult life, says it surrounded her during childhood. She reports:

> One of the interesting features of that time in the United States was that most intellectuals and most creative people were in psychoanalysis. So the only person

> I knew growing up who was not in psychoanalysis was my father, but everyone else was. And of course, they talked about their therapy, their analysis, their analyst.[13]

Dance provided a unique medium in which the realistic narrative of a film could be suspended, allowing the audience to become immersed in fantasy. With psychoanalysis so prevalent, it is not surprising that dreams were so prevalent in film, and that the non-verbal medium of dance became a vehicle for the expression of dreams and subconscious desires.

The 1938 *Carefree*, featuring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, offers a satirical portrayal of the fascination with Freudian analysis. Ginger Rogers plays a radio singer, Amanda Cooper, who has broken off her engagement multiple times. Her fiancé hires a psychiatrist, Dr. Tony Flagg (Fred Astaire), hoping that the doctor will cure Amanda's inability to make a commitment. Amanda initially refuses treatment but then she falls asleep and has a dream ("Colorblind") in which Tony sings that he has never truly seen color before finding her, and they dance together. She soon realizes she is in love with Tony. The style of the choreography draws on ballroom technique, not ballet, and it takes advantage of the film medium. Part of the sequence unfolds in slow motion. Originally, this portion of the film was meant to appear in Technicolor, presumably to enhance the dreamlike effect. John Mueller notes that in "Colorblind," five years before *Oklahoma!* premiered on Broadway, Astaire "choreographed a dream dance which advanced the plot." Mueller quips, "Perhaps it should have been called 'Ginger Makes Up Her Mind.' "[14] Indeed, the dance reveals Amanda's true feelings to the audience and to Amanda herself. It also advances the plot. However, it does not explore Amanda's motivations in any depth. In fact, it feels like an exaggerated parody. Muller's quip is revealing—he wants to call the dance "Ginger Makes Up Her Mind," indicating that the Hollywood star, Ginger Rogers, becomes the focus in this moment, rather than the character she portrays. Special effects get overtly exaggerated and the dancing takes a backseat, in contrast to earlier Astaire and Rogers collaborations. Martha P. Nochimson writes, "The dance is turned into romance by a slow-motion camera, rather than relying fully on the chemistry between Astaire and Rogers. The setting of the dance evokes a paint-by-the-numbers eroticism: a watery garden containing huge flowers bearing an obvious female sexual symbolism."[15]

After waking up from the dream and realizing she has fallen for Tony, Amanda goes to his office for a session. To ensure that her treatments will continue, she tells him about an absurdly comical made-up dream in which she transforms from Red Riding Hood into a maple tree and then gets attacked by squirrels. Tony diagnoses her with a case of "complex maladjustments" and declares, "this is one of the happiest days of my life!"[16] Ultimately, *Carefree* portrays psychoanalysis as a farce. By 1938, Astaire and Rogers had already made seven films together. Audiences associated the couple with romance, and therefore Amanda's dream revelation of her love for Tony hardly comes as a surprise. Astaire's early experiment with a dream sequence in *Carefree*, only four minutes in length, does not have the weight of the dream ballets produced in later Hollywood films. Instead, it is consistent with the film's wry mockery of psychoanalysis for comic effect.

In 1944, Ginger Rogers appeared in another film that explored psychoanalysis, the adaptation of the Kurt Weill/Moss Hart musical *Lady in the Dark*. Rogers starred as the ambitious magazine editor, Liza Elliott, seeking therapy for depression and panic attacks. In both the Broadway and Hollywood versions, dream sequences reveal aspects of Liza's character—her childhood, her desires, and her fears. Dancing occurs in the dream sequences, but Rogers, perhaps surprisingly given her skills, does not do much of the dancing herself. In fact, during Liza's circus dream, which left the Broadway music and lyrics mostly intact, she hardly moved. Her dress, made of mink with a jeweled bodice and lining, weighed nearly 15 pounds and made elaborate choreography impossible.[17] Each dream sequence had a corresponding color code planned by the director Mitchell Leisen, who had begun his career as a costume designer for Cecil B. DeMille.[18] Leisen emphasized costumes and Technicolor over the movement and staging to create the mood of Liza's dreams. Many of the dream sequences were reduced from the original Broadway versions. Scholar bruce mcclung observes, "The nearly twenty-five-minute *Glamour Dream* was hacked down to less than five; the *Wedding Dream* suffered a similar fate."[19] As with *Carefree*, Hollywood's approach to *Lady in the Dark* revealed skepticism toward Freudian analysis and a feeling that technical effects were more likely to move audiences than deep explorations of characters, particularly female characters.

After World War II, Freud's ideas took a stronger hold in the popular realm. Veterans returning from combat struggled to cope with the trauma they had experienced. Women had to find their place after some of the meaningful work they did during the war became unavailable to them. Collectively, the world found itself trying to move forward from massive casualties and destruction. It is not surprising that psychoanalysis dominated the zeitgeist, even if popularized Freudianism did not always remain faithful to Freud's actual theory and writings. Freud scholar Nathan Hale writes, "The number of Hollywood stars, directors, and producers who were 'in analysis' was legion" during the heyday of psychoanalysis in the post–World War II era.[20] During the 1950s, dance fantasies appeared more frequently in Hollywood films, and the dream ballet found its place.

## Ballet as Fantasy, but Not Dream

Two prominent fantasy ballets from Hollywood films in the 1950s stand somewhere in between the dream ballet and other Hollywood dance styles. Both are self-consciously theatrical and, while they have "dream" elements, they do not add psychological depth to the main characters in the films. "Broadway Melody" from *Singin' in the Rain* is part of a film-within-a-film, and contains a dream sequence in which a hoofer falls in love with a girl who has captured his attention. "Girl Hunt Ballet" from *The Band Wagon* is part of a play-within-a-film, and it similarly depicts a man's fascination with a girl he cannot pin down.[21] Both ballets feature Cyd Charisse as the lead dancer. Charisse was a trained ballerina who joined the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo at the age of thirteen. She has an arresting presence in both numbers. "Broadway Melody" and "Girl Hunt Ballet" rightfully deserve the label of "ballet" because they utilize ballet vocabulary. Choreographers Gene Kelly and Michael Kidd exploit Charisse's posture, long limbs, controlled technique, and ability to execute complex lifts. In addition to her skills as a dancer, her charisma and gorgeous camera-loving facial features make her unforgettable in these roles. But the two pieces diverge from the generic conventions of the "dream ballet" because they are not the dreams of main characters. "Broadway Melody" is a new number that the lead character, Don Lockwood, pitches to his producer, billing it as a "modern" number he's planning for an upcoming movie. "Girl Hunt Ballet" is a dance number in a play that the lead characters put on in an attempt to salvage their recent theatrical flop. These dances make reference to the conventions of the dream ballet, but they are explicit diversions from the primary narrative.

"Broadway Melody" tells the story of a hoofer, newly arrived in New York, trying to make it in the theater. He meets a flapper and briefly fantasizes about a future with her, but he soon realizes she is more interested in money than a real connection with him. Gene Kelly, as the choreographer, explores a number of different styles in this work. He performs a tap number set to the tune "Gotta Dance," which he also sings, and jazz steps as well as jazz hands abound throughout the piece. The "dream" pas de deux uses balletic technique, accompanied by an orchestra, and therefore it gets distinguished stylistically from the rest of the dance number.

The hoofer's first encounter with the flapper is shocking to his sensibilities. He's out of his element when he meets her in a club, smoking with a long outstretched leg (see Figure 3.4). The hoofer seems nothing like Don Lockwood, a somewhat jaded Hollywood star. He approaches the flapper with some trepidation to recapture his hat,

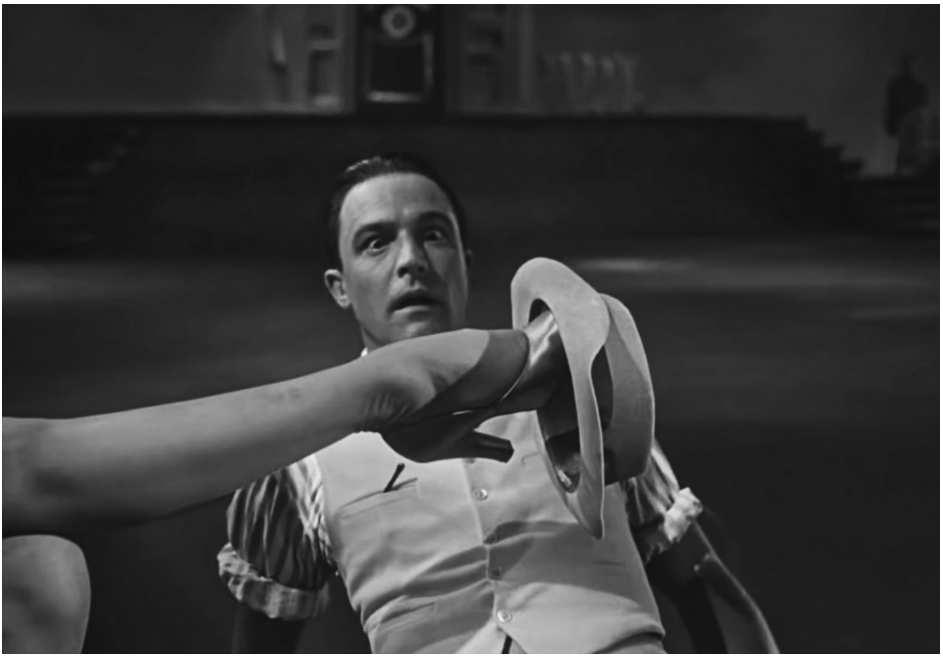

**FIGURE 3.4** Gene Kelly, Broadway Melody, *Singin' in the Rain*. MGM, 1952.

which hangs on her foot. He starts dancing with her under the watchful eye of a mob-like character who has a clear interest in protecting the girl on behalf of his boss. She wears a stunning green dress and exploits the jazz style in this section of the dance. Charisse wags her hips and shimmies her shoulders. Her knees and feet point inward instead of turning out. The flapper overtly seduces the hoofer, flaunting the sexual freedom of the 1920s. This flapper girl is nothing like Cathy, Don Lockwood's love interest. Cathy has spunk, but she also conforms to the bounds of propriety. At the end of the club sequence, the flapper gets lured back to her coin-flipping mobster by a diamond necklace, making it clear where her real interests lie.

In the second half of "Broadway Melody," the hoofer encounters the flapper again. This time she wears a white gown, short and tightly fitting, but clearly referencing a wedding gown. They meet at a party and the hoofer has become a success, surrounded by lots of other interested women. Everyone else in the room disappears and the hoofer's dream begins. The couple find themselves on a barren stage, lit with tones of pink like a sunset. The music changes from the jazz variations on the "Broadway Melody" tune into a more classical style, orchestrated with strings. The girl's hair is down and the veil blows behind her or wraps around the couple, almost functioning as another character in the dance. Charisse wears ballet shoes and the lifts are balletic. The power dynamic has shifted in this interaction. In the jazz section of the "Broadway Rhythm" number, the flapper acts as the seductress, fascinating the hoofer. She twines herself around him and he remains passive. Here, the hoofer operates in a different way, supporting his partner to show off her beauty, but also controlling the flow of the movement. The girl becomes much more compliant, allowing herself to be cradled in the hoofer's arms. They share a passionate kiss. The hoofer imagines the seductive flapper as a wife, a role that conforms more to the boundaries of traditional femininity, and consistent with the marriage plot that is expected in ballet (see ▶ Video example 3.2). The flapper's scorn becomes adoration in the hoofer's dream, and her independent agency merges with his desires. We become aware that this is indeed a dream when "reality" intervenes and the hoofer finds himself back at the party. He runs up to the flapper and grabs her arm. She looks at him condescendingly and as he removes it, she starts flipping the mobster's coin. The mobster leads her away to the disappointment of the hoofer. He leaves the party and discovers another young hoofer, just arrived in New York. The two men realize that dance is their calling and everything ends with jazzy joy.

In order for "Broadway Melody" to conform to the definition of a "dream ballet," it would have to explore a main character in some depth. But the piece serves as a digression. It tells the story of an unnamed hoofer, not of Don Lockwood. Perhaps because we know Don Lockwood has created the piece, we could assume that it represents something about the feelings and motivations of his character. He could be attracted to a more socially transgressive form of sexuality, for example, one that his love interest Cathy has left unfulfilled. But this idea is highly speculative. We also know very little about the hoofer character who is the primary subject of the dance. The piece does not reveal much about his character: he loves dancing; he's ambitious; he might want to marry the flapper; in the end, dancing gives his life meaning. The dance does not illustrate a central internal conflict that the hoofer needs to resolve. In his prior work for *An American in Paris*, Kelly showed himself capable of an in-depth character exploration through dance, but "Broadway Melody" does not serve this function.

The "Girl Hunt Ballet" in *The Band Wagon* is from the same Hollywood era as "Broadway Melody" and shares many of its features. Cyd Charisse appears again, this time dancing with Fred Astaire. The ballet uses color and movement as nonverbal tools for storytelling, similar to the dream ballet in *An American in Paris.* The films were both directed by Vincente Minnelli. "Girl Hunt Ballet" depicts a memorable story, and both the choreography and dancing are virtuosic. It's a highly effective production number that visits the realm of fantasy—we know it isn't real. But again, its primary function is entertainment, not the revelation of a main character's subconscious desires.

*The Band Wagon* tells the story of a dancer nearing the end of his career, waning in popularity, who has the opportunity to make a comeback. He gets paired up with a ballerina who has never danced on Broadway. The couple finds it difficult to work together, which was quite true to life. Michael Kidd, the choreographer, reported that Charisse and Astaire "had their doubts. They were not sure they could go through with this."[22] The "Girl Hunt Ballet" comes toward the end of the film. It is a number in a stage production that the main characters, Tony and Gabrielle, create along with a team of collaborators to replace the first version of the show, which bombs in out-of-town tryouts. It does feature the two protagonists, but they play characters instead of themselves.

"Girl Hunt Ballet" is a spoof on the film noir detective story. Charisse appears as a mysterious woman in a red dress sitting in a bar when Astaire, the detective, comes in. A voice-over narration explains that he's investigating a crime. It also reveals his view of the girl: "she was bad, she was dangerous. I wouldn't trust her any farther than I could throw her." Kidd's style is highly syncopated and jazzy. Sharply rhythmic steps get closely coordinated with the music. Kicks are quickly retracted, and the dancers often land their feet sharply on the ground to emphasize the musical accents. Astaire said to Kidd, "Gee, Mike. I'd love to learn some of these jerky movements."[23] It took Astaire some time to adapt to Kidd's style. Charisse, in contrast, seems at home. Their duet has an electric energy far different from Astaire's smooth ballroom-style partnerships with Ginger Rogers. It also has the sultry, overtly sexual and dangerous quality that Charisse displayed in "Broadway Melody." The duet ends with Charisse held upside down in Astaire's arms, looking across the room at three male figures in coats and hats. The moment recalls Balanchine's camera trick in "Slaughter on 10th Avenue" (see Figure 3.5). Then a bar fight ensues, culminating when the detective finds and shoots the killer. The killer turns out to be a woman, blonde, but startlingly similar in appearance to the girl with the red dress.

The "Girl Hunt Ballet," like "Broadway Melody," represents a digression from the primary narrative. It features the lead characters, Tony and Gabrielle, performing as the mystery woman and the detective. In that way, it could reveal aspects of their characters or their relationship that would not otherwise be available to the audience, but it does not delve into their psyches. This diegetic number is satirical and unreal.

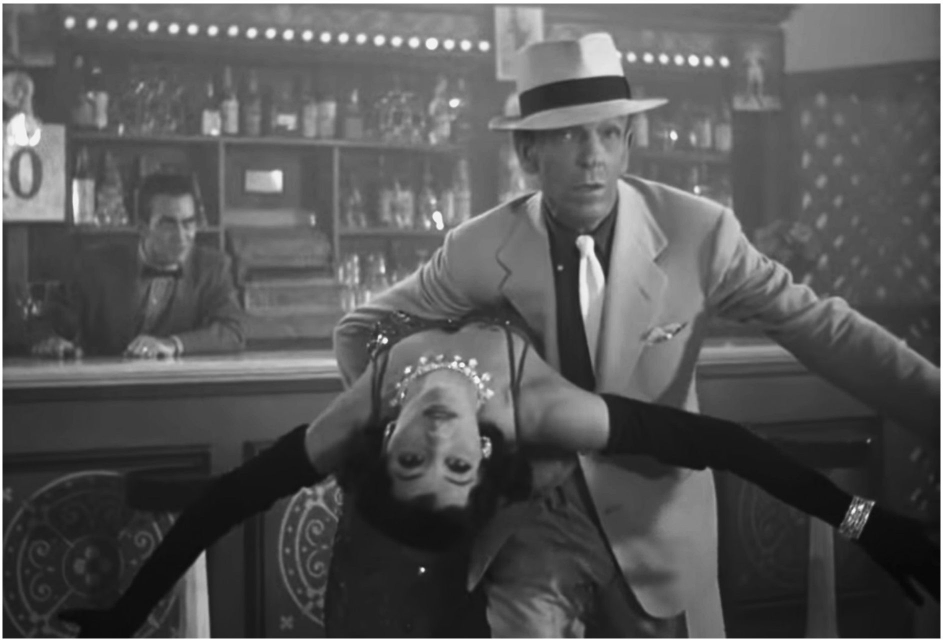

**FIGURE 3.5** Cyd Charisse and Fred Astaire

## *An American in Paris*

With *An American in Paris*, Gene Kelly used dance to explore the subconscious fears and desires of his main character, despite his own avoidance of psychoanalytic treatment. The musical's dream ballet also played a central role in the narrative of the film, bringing it to a final resolution. As mentioned earlier in the context of Balanchine's work on *The Goldwyn Follies*, Kelly was not the first choreographer who considered setting Gershwin's *An American in Paris* for dance. In 1937, Gershwin invited Balanchine to come to Hollywood and work with him, and the two men planned a ballet for the piece before Gershwin's tragic death from a brain tumor. Because that project never came to fruition, Kelly's 1951 choreography remains an early and definitive choreographic setting for the music.[24] Kelly collaborated with Vincente Minnelli, who directed the film. Minnelli's style was characterized by "a lush and daring use of color" as well as "the seamless fusion of music and camera movement," both of which can also be seen in *The Band Wagon*.[25] The impetus for *An American in Paris* came when the producer Arthur Freed first heard Gershwin's *An American in Paris* tone poem performed in the late 1940s. He imagined the story of a World War II American GI and artist who decides to remain in Paris after the war. Freed approached Ira Gershwin, George's brother, about using the music in his film. Ira agreed on the condition that the rest of the score would only utilize Gershwin songs. Alan Jay Lerner, who had written the books for the Broadway productions of *Brigadoon* (1947) and *Love Life* (1948), wrote the scenario. Music and dance become the focal point in telling the story of the painter Jerry Mulligan, his female patron Milo Roberts, and his true love Lise.

Jerry, as a war veteran and a painter struggling to make a living, seems ripe for Freudian analysis. Milo finds him selling his paintings on the street and buys a couple of his pieces. She invites him to deliver them to her residence, and we realize she is quite a wealthy woman. We also wonder whether art or desire motivates her interest in Jerry. We learn from other characters that she has a habit of supporting handsome young artists. Jerry feels torn about accepting her sponsorship. His composer friend sarcastically asks him, "Tell me, when you get married [to Milo] will you keep your maiden name?"[26] The relationship emasculates him, and clearly he wishes he could earn a living without her, but he also sees that Milo has access to resources and a network that he lacks. Her name, money, and influence mark Milo as stereotypically masculine, and Jerry finds that he is not attracted to her. Instead, he feels drawn to a young girl he meets in a club, Lise, who captivates him the first time he sees her. We never learn much about Lise in the course of the film. At one point Jerry declares, "Lise, I don't know whether you're a girl of mystery or just a still water that doesn't run deep." She is in a relationship with an older man who took care of her during the war, a well-known singer (Henri) who happens to be a friend of Jerry's. Toward the end of the film, Jerry and Milo attend a wild artist's black-and-white ball and they encounter Henri and Lise, who reveal their plans to marry the next day. Jerry is devastated. Everything seems in question for him. He tells Milo, "I'm a fake," and leaves the party to brood on the balcony overlooking the Paris skyline.

Right before the ballet, Lise and Jerry have their final encounter. She tells him she wishes she could be with him, but she insists he'll forget her: "Paris has ways of making you forget." Jerry replies, "I came to Paris to study and to paint, because Utrillo did, and Toulouse-Lautrec did, and Rouault did. I love what they created and I thought something would happen to me too. Well it happened all right. Now what have I got left?" He takes a sketch of L'Arc de Triomphe that he drew after learning Lise's news and rips it in half, then throws it over the balcony. He watches Lise depart in Henri's car, and the ballet begins.

The seventeen-minute ballet opens with Jerry as a translucent hologram entering the black-and-white background of Paris sketch. This trick of the camera could only be accomplished in the medium of film. He gradually becomes solid flesh as the image gets its color, and through the rest of the ballet Minnelli's bright colors abound. Jerry's fantasy realm is filled with servicemen, big bands, a large central fountain in the Place de la Concorde, smaller villages, and most important, scenes from famous paintings. In a reference to the marriage plot at the beginning of the ballet, Jerry finds himself surrounded by demonic brides in white gowns who pursue him as he pushes them away. Women in similar red dresses also appear and pursue him. On the whole, Jerry imagines himself desired by many women who do not conform to his preferred type. His jerky, uncomfortable interactions with them might mirror his feelings for Milo.

Lise appears throughout the ballet in different guises. In an earlier dance sequence from the film, Henri verbally describes Lise in a voiceover as she dances to display aspects of her character. Each short dance is different. In one she appears spiritual, in the next lusty. She is "sweet and shy," a modern flapper, an incessant and very flexible reader (she performs a split with a book in her hand), and "the gayest girl in the world." The short set pieces allow Caron to show her versatility, but we learn almost nothing about Lise's character. She only gets depicted through the eyes of the men describing her.

In the dream ballet, Lise appears as Jerry imagines her, and generally she represents characters from famous paintings.[27] In one scene, she looks like a flower in a light blue gown emerging from Renoir's *Pont Neuf* (1872). On pointe, she floats by Jerry using the quick and fluid steps of the bourrée, and they dance a pas de deux. Here she appears fragile, "the *femme-fleur* of the Surrealists, for whom woman is always a bridge to the unconscious."[28] She eludes Jerry after their dance, disappearing with a trick of the camera. At the end of this scene, he is left with an armful of carnations, but no girl. Soon Lise comes back, this time in a striped dress modeled after the costume from Rousseau's painting *The Sleeping Gypsy* (1897). Lise and a group of girls in similar costumes dance energetically on pointe. Jerry appears as a hoofer accompanied by a group of men dancing in vaudeville costumes with hats and canes. The couple perform a pas de deux in which he taps and she stays on pointe. Eventually she adopts his bent-over movement style, although she remains on her toes. They end the number hats in hand, stomping offstage. Kelly claimed, "I purposely had the fellows do everything the way George M. Cohan would do it, like an American would do it. In the middle of that French scene. I wanted to do something immediately identifiable as American."[29] Ballet is coded as French for Kelly and probably for most American viewers, while vaudeville and tap styles are coded as American.

In the most striking choreography of the ballet, Lise and Jerry appear as characters from Toulouse-Lautrec. Jerry becomes "Chocolat," a famous dancer depicted in Toulouse-Lautrec's sketch "Chocolat dansant dans un bar" (see Figures 3.6 and 3.7). Lise becomes Jane Avril, a can-can dancer made famous at the Moulin Rouge. The dancer identified as "Chocolat" was a former Afro-Cuban slave who emigrated to France via Spain and became famous as "the black foil to the white clown in the Belle Epoque's most famous clown duo: Foottit and Chocolat."[30] Toulouse-Lautrec sketched "Chocolat" dancing in a bar, and in the image, the dancer takes on a quality of elegance with his tall posture, raised right arm, and posed hand that is almost reminiscent of ballet. However, Toulouse-Lautrec also assigns him the exaggerated lips and facial features frequently associated with racist depictions of Black performers during this era. In his regular act, Chocolat was mocked for his stupidity and became known for his "flabbergasted reactions" and his laughter.[31] Kelly's figure-hugging costume, beret, and prancing jumps stand out in this number. He does not move like the confident hoofer we see in the prior scene, a role he inhabits comfortably, as if it is second nature. The Toulouse-Lautrec sequence of the ballet seems to convey the idea that Jerry is posing as a Parisian artist.

Leslie Caron argued that the Toulouse-Lautrec sequence in *An American in Paris* "was the most fun," recalling, "I think Gene loved that the best." Kelly claimed he always wanted to use the Toulouse-Lautrec sketch in a dance number, and he said he "pored through many books" to learn about the dancer who was the subject of the work.[32]

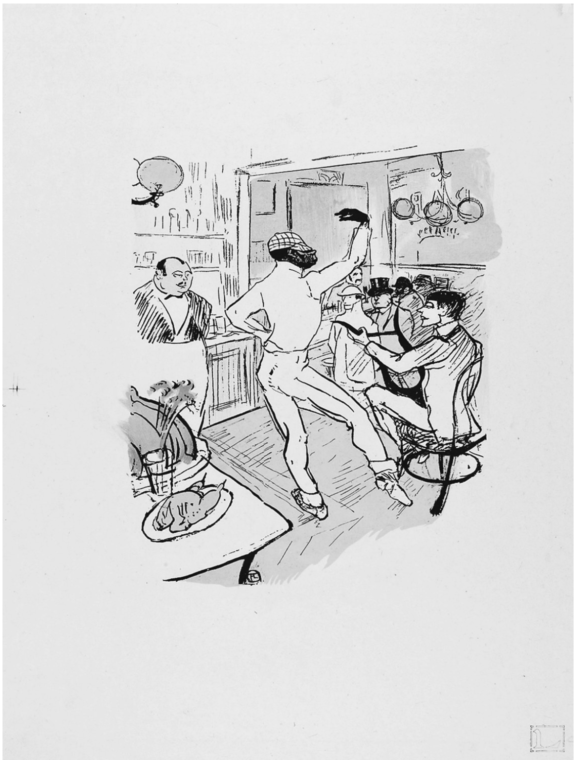

**FIGURE 3.6** Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Chocolat Dancing*, 1896. The Art Institute of Chicago.

He could not find much information, other than a reference to him performing at "Le Jockey," a gentleman's club in Paris. The form-fitting costume Kelly wears emphasizes his strong physique. Kelly dances with bent knees throughout much of the piece, frequently turned inward, and he times his wide-open jazz hands with Gershwin's blaring trumpets in a reference to minstrel shows and Al Jolson. Often, Kelly returns to the opening pose with a little shake of shoulders, as if to remind himself that he is embodying Toulouse-Lautrec's sketch. His movements are athletic and difficult. At one point, he jumps several feet up from the ground onto the stage to dance with Lise, without the aid of his hands, showing off his physical strength. Earlier in the ballet, Lise and Jerry share a very sensual duet to the accompaniment of a blues melody. Here, with Lise's can-can dancing morphing into jumping steps that mimic Jerry's, they seem to prance with joy. By adopting the character of a Black dancer and using that character as a means of expressing a freedom of physical movement that is not typically allowed in proper white circles, Kelly references familiar tropes for 1950s audiences. Lise's role as a can-can dancer similarly flouts the restrictions of social propriety. Jerry and Lise are playing dream characters immersed in a sexually liberated Parisian nightlife when they adopt the personas of Chocolat and Jane Avril, but this is a performance, and not their true

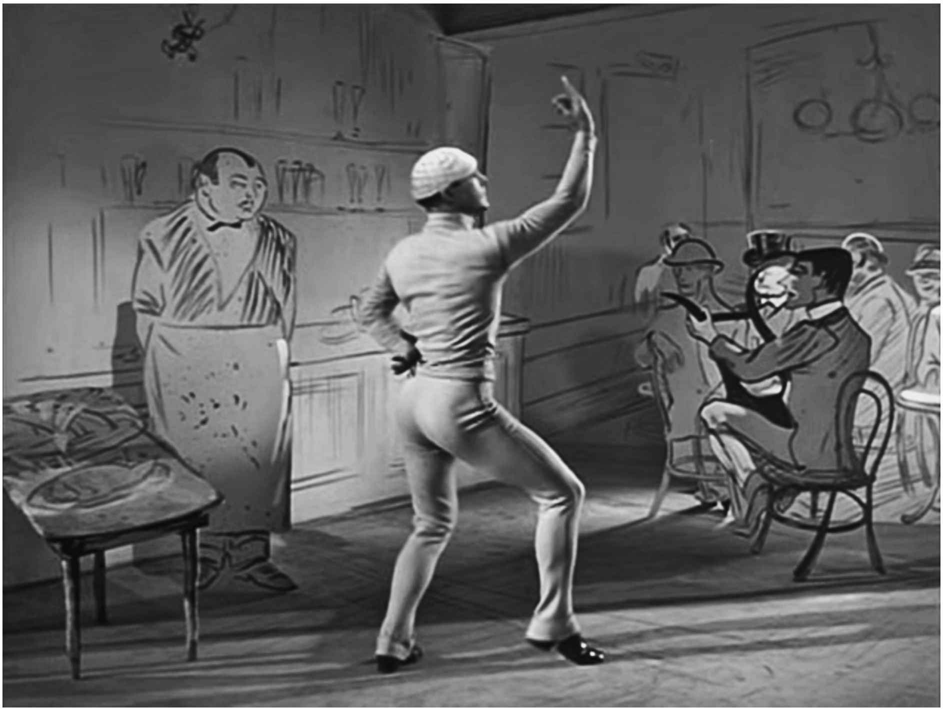

**FIGURE 3.7** Gene Kelly, "Chocolat," *An American in Paris.* MGM, 1951.

selves. French literary scholar Rae Beth Gordon argues that when Chocolat and Jane Avril "strut off stage in a high-stepping Cake-Walk, Chocolat becomes Jerry Mulligan again, having successfully navigated the dangers of Paris by Night."[33]

British film scholar Pam Cook argues that "Jerry's adoption of Chocolat's identity can be seen as colonization of black artistic accomplishment by a white performer, an accusation which might also be leveled at Gene Kelly's appropriation of African-American dance." Yet she adds that "Jerry's impersonation does not qualify as mimicry, since he is not wearing blackface; rather it can be understood as homage, albeit ambiguous."[34] Gene Kelly also described this scene as an homage to Chocolat. The costume, the virtuosity, and the musicality of the dance combine to make this one of the most arresting moments in the *American in Paris* dream ballet. However, the absence of blackface does not erase the racist tropes associated with the Chocolat episode. Kelly associates the open expression of sexuality and physical prowess with the body and the postures of Chocolat, reviving stereotypes that degraded the dancer who originated the role. The message Kelly sends about Jerry's character here is ambiguous—is Jerry comfortable playing the part of Chocolat, or is it awkward for him? Is this just another artist's pose Jerry is trying on for size? What does this moment in the ballet say about Jerry's feelings regarding his own masculinity? Answers to these questions might vary, depending on one's point of view. But at the end of the ballet, Jerry definitively leaves the role of Chocolat behind, in the realm of his subconscious.

When the dream ballet ends, *An American in Paris* comes to a sudden resolution. Henri returns Lise to the party after hearing Lise and Jerry talking and coming to the realization that has to let her go. The movie has a happy ending when the two lovers come back together. They embrace, and Lise is still wearing the white dress from the artist's black-and-white ball. Her dress references the marriage plot, and she has decided not to marry Henry, so we imagine Jerry must be her permanent choice. But what happens to Jerry's art career? How will he resolve the conflicts expressed in the ballet? And does he really love Lise, or is he in love with the images of Paris she represents? The answers remain unclear.

## Laurey's Dream: The Definitive Dream Ballet

When Kelly choreographed the ballet for *An American in Paris*, Agnes de Mille had already set the standard for the dream ballet. *Oklahoma!* premiered on Broadway in 1943, and Laurey's dream ended the first act. The ballet depicted Jud, the villain, murdering Curly, and Laurey woke to find Jud hovering menacingly, waiting to take her to the box social. The audience left the theater for intermission wondering what might happen next. In the 1955 film version of *Oklahoma!*, de Mille aimed to have a similar impact on the story of the film musical.

De Mille grew up in Hollywood, daughter of a screenwriter and niece of the legendary Cecil B. DeMille. She met Charlie Chaplin in her childhood home and she frequented film studios during her youth and early adulthood. She understood the medium, but still found it difficult to make the transition to choreographing for the camera. Set designer Oliver Smith claimed, "she didn't have an eye for the camera at all."[35] According to Bambi Linn, who danced the role of Dream Laurey, de Mille initially wanted the ballet shot from afar, as if the dancers were onstage. The cinematographer and the director convinced her to let the camera move among the dancers, but she never achieved a balance between long shots that showed the full impact of the thirty-two-person ensemble and close-ups that captured the emotions of the lead dancers. James Mitchell, Dream Curly, lamented:

> Agnes never got a shot of us coming together so you could see both our faces. She got Bambi running presumably toward me, then me from the back, running, and then a cut to the lift almost accomplished. So you never saw the whole thing.[36]

Bambi Linn said the dream ballet sequence was shot "about twenty-five times before they got the version you see on the screen . . . money was just flying out the window."[37] Still, the final product was made up of both wide shots and close-ups in which dancers conveyed complex emotions through their facial expressions. Audiences of the stage version could never have seen these expressions in such detail. The ballet therefore achieves one of de Mille's aims, to provide viewers with "a cross-section of Laurie's heart."[38]

Unlike in *An American in Paris* and *La La Land*, de Mille uses dancers, not actors, to portray her lead characters, Laurey and Curly. In order to transition from "reality" into "dream," Laurey sings, "Then out of my dreams I'll go, into a dream with you." Gordon MacRae, who plays Curly, appears onstage alongside his dream double, James Mitchell, making the identity of Laurey's dream lover clear to the audience. Shirley Jones, as Laurey, approaches her double, Bambi Linn, touches her hand, then exits. The two dancers get immersed in clouds with a blue-sky backdrop, emphasizing the dreamscape using effects that now seem dated. Jud is the only character in the ballet played by the actor who performs the role in the rest of the film—Rod Steiger. The fact that Steiger played both "real" and dream Jud gives the film version a dose of harsh realism. Jud's character takes on an even more menacing quality at the end of the ballet, which shows him assaulting Laurey and murdering Curly, a surprising turn in the otherwise lighthearted film.

De Mille's *Oklahoma!* dream ballet has its roots in the marriage plot. Early in the ballet, the women of the village bring Laurey a wedding gown and a veil floats down from the sky. The women celebrate the impending marriage and the cowboys enter as if riding imaginary horses. Laurey walks down the aisle to meet Curly, who raises her veil. But then suddenly, he becomes Jud, and the scene turns dark. All of the villagers, including Curly, back away from Laurey and she flees into the church. There she finds Jud surrounded by the postcard girls whose images populated the walls of his room on the farm. The set looks like a brothel, with red couches and stairs leading nowhere, but we imagine they might reach the top floor bedrooms if they had a destination. The girls dance to the tune of "I cain't say no," and one of them looks strikingly like Ado Annie. The lead postcard girl approaches Laurey, rips her wedding dress, and throws her into Jud's arms to the strains of "Pore Jud Is Daid." Laurey lies like a ragdoll in Jud's arms as he tries to dance with her. She joins the postcard girls, Jud, and the cowboys in a final kickline, throwing her legs in the air as if her body has become possessed and she is dancing in spite of herself (see ▶ Video example 3.3). In this scene, Laurey lacks agency, and we come to understand that she has no desire to choose Jud. Her fascination with him goes against her conscious will.

As the dance comes to an end, Laurey runs from Jud and climbs the staircase to nowhere. A corridor appears and Laurey runs through it. Then suddenly she finds herself outside the brothel on a windy plain. Curly and Jud are there and a fight ensues between the two rival suitors. The drama of the fight comes from the scenery. On the backdrop is painted a tornado, and wind whips through the air, accompanied by the proper sound effects. The end of the fight occurs in slow motion, a decision that de Mille supported. The percussive music, sound of the tornado, and windswept set bring the scene to a climax in which Jud brutally strangles Curly and drags his lifeless body across the stage. He carries Laurey away, hoisting her over his head like a prize. The transition out of the dream is sudden as Jud calls for Laurey and his shadow covers her sleeping body. She wakes startled, staring up at his looming figure. It is an ominous precursor to the next scene at the box social. As de Mille aptly wrote, "[Laurey] is by this time a mighty apprehensive girl."[39]

De Mille complicates the marriage plot with this ballet. At the end of it, viewers understand that Laurey has chosen Curly. Deep in Laurey's subconscious, he is the one she loves and wants to join with, sanctioned by the church and the other members of their community. But she senses that Jud represents a threat to that stability. It appears she may not have the power to resist him. While Jud displays an undercurrent of menace in the rest of the film, in the dream ballet it becomes clear that his brand of sexuality and violence represents a threat to Laurey, Curly, and the stability of the Oklahoma Territory. De Mille shows us this by revealing Laurey's psychological conflict. While the execution of this concept can appear dated from a twenty-first-century perspective—the bright colors, rushing wind sounds, cloud scenes, and nightmarish corridors lack the sophistication of modern special effects—de Mille's revision of the marriage plot was a feminist statement in 1955. The ballet adds a layer of complexity to the *Oklahoma!* film and it asks questions about feminine agency that were radical for its era.

## *La La Land* and the Dream Ballet in the Twenty-First Century

The dream ballet at the end of *La La Land* appeared on screen over sixty years after its predecessors. Yet it owes a great deal to the ballets in *An American in Paris* and *Oklahoma!* Writer/director Damien Chazelle describes *An American in Paris* as "a movie we just pillaged." When he chose Mandy Moore as a choreographer, he found "someone who was comfortable with modern dance forms and popular dancing, but also either came from or had experience in the ballet world."[40] Chazelle also knew Moore understood and appreciated the work of Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, and Michael Kidd. Moore pays homage to all of these past artists in her dances, and her work also shares commonalities with de Mille's. Both women thought carefully about how to integrate dance smoothly into their musicals. Moore and Chazelle intentionally designed transitions between dialogue and dance scenes—"how do you go from a walk to a skip to a chassé?"—something that preoccupied de Mille's thinking as she produced her seminal Broadway works.[41] Moore also takes an approach to character development quite similar to de Mille's in the dream sequence, using movement as a way of exposing the hidden feelings of her female protagonist. Moore and Chazelle make direct reference to *An American in Paris* in *La La Land*—in fact, Paris becomes an important fantasy setting for Mia, as it was for Jerry. And yet, an adaptation of the dream ballet for a twenty-first-century audience seemed to require a less jarring and more natural approach. *Oklahoma!*'s floating clouds, tornado-like winds, bright colors, and trained dancers would have taken viewers too far outside of the *La La Land* narrative. Kelly and Caron's polished work as seasoned dancers did not feel mismatched for their characters in *An American in Paris.* In fact, the plot of that film is quite loose and largely serves to connect the music and dance numbers. *La La Land* attempts more than that—the story addresses commercialism in both Hollywood and the film industry, and both characters grapple with the idea of what it means to succeed professionally. Moore and Chazelle use Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling's lack of dance training to their advantage—the transitions between natural movements and dance become smoother because the dances emphasize simple movements over virtuosity. Moore says, "I think [the film] would have lost some of its charm and also its accessibility to those who watch it if it had been absolutely perfect."[42] *La La Land* intentionally recalls the musicals of the past while updating their styles for a contemporary audience, one accustomed to sophisticated technical effects but also a more natural and less performative approach to acting.

Most of *La La Land*'s plot focuses on Mia and Sebastian's struggles to achieve their dreams. At the end of the film, when the dream sequence begins, both characters have reached their goals. Sebastian owns a jazz club. Mia has become a successful Hollywood actress, married someone else, and had a child. Mia comes to Sebastian's club with her husband, and Sebastian spots her in the crowd. He plays their simple love theme on the piano, and the music touches off a daydream in which Mia imagines the path her life would have taken if she and Sebastian had stayed together. Much of the dream sequence consists of imaginary flashbacks that contain no dancing. For example, it includes home movie–style footage of Mia pregnant with Sebastian's child, and later Mia and Sebastian with their imaginary toddler. But there are overt references to Minnelli's colorful scenery from the ballet in *An American in Paris* and a balletic pas de deux that make it clear Moore and Chazelle want to invoke the dream ballets of the past to help bring Mia's inner thoughts to light.

References to Paris abound in the *La La Land* dream sequence, but the most overt homage to *An American in Paris* occurs right after Mia imagines Sebastian cheering the wild success of her one-woman show, which features a lit-up Eiffel Tower as the focus of its backdrop. Mia and Sebastian embrace joyfully behind the scenes, and then they walk through a stage door into a new set. At first it appears all white, but soon it fills with colorful paintings. The paintings show an American scene, rather than a Parisian one—partially drawn skyscrapers, Los Angeles palm trees, the Hollywood sign, and an auto shop, all in the bold colors utilized by Minnelli. Dancers wear similarly bright dresses. At stage right, a freeway overpass dominates the scene, bringing to mind the film's memorable opening ensemble dance in which the two main characters are both stuck in Los Angeles traffic. Mia and Sebastian walk through this stage setting without dancing much, but the other performers swing, kick, and turn in a nostalgic Broadway style. This tribute to Minnelli and Kelly feels like an interlude, and the character development in this portion of the dream sequence remains minimal.

Following Mia's successful audition, filmed in silhouette and recalling her performance of "Audition (The Fools Who Dream)," the couple flies to Paris. They walk along the banks of the painted Seine, and the style of the painting looks more similar to Disneyland than Renoir. Mia is dressed in white and Sebastian wears a suit. They start to waltz and the Paris scene disappears. The couple is surrounded by points of light representing stars, and they dance on a reflective surface that looks like water. The waltz is the most balletic moment in the sequence. Mia's carriage is straight, and her arms are long. She turns and there are a few simple lifts. Her white dress recalls the marriage plot (see ▶ Video example 3.4). The home movie cuts that tell the story of Mia and Sebastian's imaginary marriage come immediately after this waltz. It becomes clear to viewers that Mia has an extended fantasy about what her life might have been with Sebastian had they stayed together.

After the home movie sequence, Mia pictures herself and Sebastian leaving the babysitter for the evening, mirroring an earlier scene in which Mia appeared with her actual husband. Sebastian and Mia enter the club, and the dream comes to an end with Mia sitting in the audience listening to the real Sebastian (not the dream Sebastian) playing their love theme in a single line on the piano. Mia looks distressed and tells her husband they should leave—it is clear she has awoken from her daydream. What do we learn about her character from this lengthy sequence? She still has feelings for Sebastian. Perhaps she regrets some of the choices she made and wishes her former lover could have joined her on her journey to success. But as she leaves the club, she catches Sebastian's eye. They smile and nod at one another wistfully. "The End" is declared in cursive, paying tribute to the "Made in Hollywood, U.S.A" film musicals of an earlier era.

*La La Land* does not wrap the marriage plot into a neat bow the way *An American Paris* does at the end of its story when Lise and Jerry end up together. Seb and Mia never get their happy ending. But the *La La Land* dream ballet does not have the deeply Freudian and radical quality of de Mille's *Oklahoma!* dream ballet. De Mille's ballet speaks to a woman's lack of agency in choosing a husband. It depicts rape and abuse at the hands of a powerfully disruptive male villain. It calls into question the institution of marriage as a stabilizing force within a community. Despite its twenty-first-century context, the *La La Land* ballet accepts traditional marriage as a given. Mia's inner life seems fixated on a traditional marriage plot. She wonders whether she would have found career fulfillment and happiness if she had married Sebastian. However, she does seem to have found those things with her real husband and child. Moore and Chazelle accept the marriage plot, and the only thing that remains ambiguous about their ending is whether Mia feels that she has chosen the right man.

* * *

De Mille's brand of dream ballet had limited feasibility in Hollywood. As Bambi Linn pointed out, the ballet took a long time to shoot and cost the studio a great deal of money. Richard Rodgers called de Mille "the most temperamental person associated with the project," and the *Oklahoma!* film marked the end of her working relationship with Rodgers and Hammerstein.[43] The producers of *An American in Paris* took a significant risk when they allowed Minnelli and Kelly to end the film with a dream ballet. The risk resulted in an Academy Award, but the technique has rarely been repeated. The significance of the dream ballet lies in its unique way of adding depth to characters whose feelings and motivations cannot be brought to the surface in any other medium besides dance. Among the choreographers working in the genre, Kelly and de Mille understood this most deeply. Perhaps as contemporary film artists seek innovative ways to surface obscured realms of the human experience, including gender and sexuality, the dream ballet will serve as an innovative model of expression. Commercial constraints and audience expectations make it difficult to imagine the dream ballet finding a frequent place in the film musicals of the future. Still, it remains fascinating as a nonverbal mechanism for revealing a character's subconscious.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## NOTES

1. De Mille's second-act ballet for *Carousel* was also adapted for the screen in 1956. In the film version, aspects of Louise's character are revealed through dance, following the pattern of in-depth character exploration that de Mille initiated with the dream ballet in *Oklahoma!* However, de Mille had no involvement with the film version of *Carousel* and she was angered by choreographer Rod Alexander's adaptation of her dances. Due to the complex history of how the film version of the *Carousel* ballet came about, and the prominence of Laurey's dream in the history of the genre, *Oklahoma!*'s dream ballet serves as a more useful case study. For more on de Mille's views on the *Carousel* film, see Kara Anne Gardner, Agnes de Mille: *Telling Stories in Broadway Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 108–113.
2. Gardner, *Agnes de Mille*, 30–40.
3. Sally Banes, *Dancing Women: Female Bodies Onstage* (London: Routledge 1998), 6.
4. Banes, *Dancing Women*, 6.
5. Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick, *No Fixed Points* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 714.
6. See Bernard Taper, "An Ace Job on the Terp Angle," in *Balanchine: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 177–201.
7. The George Balanchine Foundation has begun documenting and researching Balanchine's popular repertoire in the "Popular Balanchine" project. For notes on the repertory and a guide to research materials, see http://www.balanchine.org/03/popularbalanchine.html.
8. Quoted in John Mueller, *Astaire Dancing: The Musical Films* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 23.
9. Reynolds and McCormick, *No Fixed Points*, 720–721.

10. Brill, Introduction to Freud, *Three Contributions*, 4th ed. (New York and Washington: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing, 1930), xiii. Quoted in Nathan G. Hale, *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans, 1916–1985* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 98.
11. Brill, Introduction, 5.
12. bruce d mcclung, *Lady in the Dark: Biography of a Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 45.
13. https://circulatingnow.nlm.nih.gov/2014/03/12/on-combat-fatigue-irritability-kerry-kelly-novick-part-1/.
14. John Mueller, "Fred Astaire and the Integrated Musical," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1983): 36.
15. Martha P. Nochimson, *Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers: Music Makes Me* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 174.
16. This scene from *Carefree* can be viewed in full at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KkFRtpGoWZI.
17. mcclung, *Lady in the Dark*, 170.
18. mcclung, *Lady in the Dark*, 170.
19. mcclung, *Lady in the Dark*, 174.
20. Hale, *Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 288.
21. Arthur Freed produced *Singin' in the Rain*, *The Band Wagon*, and *An American in Paris*, in addition to other films (*Yolanda and the Thief* in 1945, *The Pirate* in 1948, *On the Town* in 1949) that used dance to explore a dream or fantasy realm. Although I've chosen to discuss a limited set of examples here, it would be interesting to do an in-depth comparative analysis on the use of dance in Freed's films.
22. Peter J. Levinson, *Puttin' on the Ritz: Fred Astaire and the Fine Art of Panache* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 187.
23. Levinson, *Puttin' on the Ritz*, 187.
24. See Taper, *Balanchine*, 187.
25. Stephen Harvey, *Directed by Vincente Minnelli*, foreword by Liza Minnelli (New York: The Museum of Modern Art; Harper & Row, 1989), 15.
26. *An American in Paris*, Warner Home Video, release date June 6, 2000.
27. See Angela Dalle-Vacche, "A Painter in Hollywood: Vincente Minnelli's 'An American in Paris,'" *Cinema Journal* 32, no. 1 (Autumn 1992): 63–83.
28. Dalle-Vacche, "A Painter in Hollywood," 71.
29. Donald Knox *The Magic Factory: How MGM Made "An American in Paris,"* foreword by Andrew Sarris (New York: Praeger, 1973), xi.
30. Rae Beth Gordon, *Dances with Darwin, 1875–1910: Vernacular Modernity in France* (2016) New York: Routledge,160.
31. Gordon, *Dances with Darwin*, 160.
32. These quotes appear among a compilation of excerpts from "'S Wonderful: The Making of 'An American in Paris' " (2008) and BBC's "An Evening with Gene Kelly." See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQzBSJ8CZEk.
33. Gordon, *Dances with Darwin*, 196.
34. Pam Cook, "An American in Paris," in *America First: Naming the Nation in US Film*, ed. Mandy Merck (New York: Routledge, 2007), 116.
35. Quoted in Carol Easton, *No Intermissions: The Life of Agnes de Mille* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1996), 344.

36. Quoted in Easton, *No Intermissions*, 344.
37. Quoted in Easton, *No Intermissions*, 344.
38. De Mille, "In adapting the ballet to the screen," in "Choreographic Notes for Oklahoma!" Agnes de Mille Papers, Dance Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, MGZMD 100, f. 659, p. 3. De Mille spelled "Laurey" as "Laurie" throughout these notes.
39. De Mille, "In adapting the ballet to the screen," 5.
40. See Joe McGovern, "How *An American in Paris* Won Best Picture and Changed Hollywood," February 2, 2017. Retrieved from https://ew.com/oscars/2017/02/02/oscars-american-in-paris-musicals-hollywood/. Also see "Shall They Dance? Making *La La Land* Move," *New York Times*, December 13, 2016. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/arts/dance/mandy-moore-dance-in-la-la-land.html.
41. McGovern, "How *An American in Paris* Won Best Picture."
42. "Shall They Dance?"
43. Richard Rodgers, *Musical Stages* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 285. Also see Kara Anne Gardner, *Agnes de Mille: Telling Stories in Broadway Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 40.

# CHAPTER 4

# SINGING AND DANCING IN WIDESCREEN

## *The Extreme Aesthetics of the Mid-1950s Studio Musical Number*

TODD DECKER

The singing and dancing body occupied a central place—normatively center screen—in studio-era Hollywood musical film from the early 1930s on. In most dance-centric musical numbers, the camera follows dancing bodies framed in full figure. Fred Astaire is the defining creative figure here: his innovation of a camera dolly that allowed for slight and smooth adjustments keeping one or two (rarely three) dancing bodies centered in the frame enabled a widely applicable norm for the aesthetics of the genre.[1] (Busby Berkeley's contrasting approach is the exception that proves the rule.) The square-ish 1.37:1 aspect ratio of the 1930s and 1940s was ideally suited to this approach to screen dancing, which generally privileged one or two human forms as the measure of all things (Figures 4.1a and 4.2a). The edges of the frame were important only to the extent that performing bodies remained with the limits of the seen—and, as noted, these limits were adjusted constantly to the movement of the performing body.

Then, in the mid-1950s, the Hollywood studios abruptly converted to widescreen aspect ratios, which brought with them dramatically larger screens in first-run movie palaces. This industry-wide shift fundamentally changed the spatial context for screen song and dance and had visible effects on the performing body as staged, choreographed, framed, and edited in the Hollywood musical genre. This chapter considers a corpus of thirty-one widescreen musical films released by the major Hollywood studios between 1954 and 1958 (see Table 4.1) and attends rather narrowly to the suddenly urgent question faced by the makers of these films: how to stage and frame the singing and dancing body in widescreen.

Table 4.1 Corpus of Thirty-One Widescreen Musicals (Released between 1954 and 1958) Listed in Order of New York premiere

| Title | Studio / Producer | Production begins | Production ends | New York premiere | Director | Musical stars | Choreographer |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Rose Marie* | MGM (Cummings Unit) | Aug. 1953 | Oct. 1953 | April 1954 | Mervyn LeRoy | Ann Blyth, Howard Keel | Busby Berkeley |
| *Lucky Me* | Warner Bros. | Nov. 1953 | Feb. 1954 | April 1954 | Jack Donohue | Doris Day | LeRoy Prinz |
| *The Student Prince* | MGM (Pasternak Unit) | Dec. 1953 | Jan. 1954 | June 1954 | Richard Thorpe | Edmund Purdom (voiced by Mario Lanza), Ann Blyth | Hermes Pan |
| *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* | MGM (Cummings Unit) | Nov. 1953 | Feb. 1954 | July 1954 | Stanley Donen | Jane Powell, Howard Keel | Michael Kidd |
| *Brigadoon* | MGM (Freed Unit) | Dec. 1953 | March 1954 | Sept. 1954 | Vincente Minnelli | Gene Kelly, Cyd Charisse | Gene Kelly |
| *A Star Is Born* | Transcona [Warner Bros.] | Oct. 1953 | Feb. 1954 | Sept. 1954 | George Cukor | Judy Garland | Richard Barstow |
| *White Christmas* | Paramount | Sept. 1953 | Dec. 1953 | Oct. 1954 | Michael Curtiz | Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye, Rosemary Clooney, Vera-Lynn | Robert Alton |
| *Athena* | MGM (Pasternak Unit) | March 1954 | June 1954 | Nov. 1954 | Richard Thorpe | Jane Powell, Debbie Reynolds | Valerie Bettis |
| *Deep in My Heart* | MGM (Roger Edens) | April 1954 | June 1954 | Dec. 1954 | Stanley Donen | Various MGM stars (all in cameos) | *Various* |
| *There's No Business Like Show Business* | 20C Fox / Sol C. Siegel | May 1954 | Aug. 1954 | Dec. 1954 | Walter Lang | Ethel Merman, Donald O'Connor, Dan Dailey, Mitzi Gaynor, Marilyn Monroe, Johnny Ray | Robert Alton |
| *Jupiter's Darling* | MGM (Wells) | May 1954 | Aug. 1954 | Feb. 1955 | George Sidney | Esther Williams, Howard Keel, Marge and Gower Champion | Hermes Pan |
| *Three for the Show* | Columbia | Feb. 1954 | May 1954 | Feb. 1955 | H. C. Potter | Betty Grable, Marge and Gower Champion | Jack Cole |

(*continued*)

**Table 4.1 Continued**

| Title | Studio / Producer | Production begins | Production ends | New York premiere | Director | Musical stars | Choreographer |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Hit the Deck* | MGM (Pasternak Unit) | Aug. 1954 | Oct. 1954 | March 1955 | Roy Rowland | Tony Martin, Russ Tamblyn, Vic Damone, Debbie Reynolds, Ann Miller, Jane Powell | Hermes Pan |
| *The Glass Slipper* | MGM Edwin H. Knopf | June 1954 | Aug. 1954 | March 1955 | Charles Walters | Leslie Caron | Roland Petit |
| *Daddy Long Legs* | Fox | Oct. 1954 | Feb. 1955 | May 1955 | Jean Negulesco | Fred Astaire, Leslie Caron | Fred Astaire, Roland Petit |
| *Love Me or Leave Me* | Warner Bros. | Dec. 1954 | Feb. 1955 | May 1955 | Charles Vidor | Doris Day | Alex Romero |
| *It's Always Fair Weather* | MGM Freed | Oct. 1954 | May 1955 | Sept. 1955 | Stanley Donen | Gene Kelly, Michael Kidd, Dan Dailey, Cyd Charisse, Dolores Gray | Stanley Donen, Gene Kelly |
| *My Sister Eileen* | Columbia | Sept. 1954 | Dec. 1954 | Sept. 1955 | Richard Quine | Betty Garrett, Janet Leigh, Bob Fosse, Tommy Rall | Bob Fosse |
| *Guys and Dolls* | Samuel Goldwyn | March 1955 | July 1955 | Nov. 1955 | Joseph L. Mankiewicz | Frank Sinatra, Vivian Blaine, Marlon Brando, Jean Simmons | Michael Kidd |
| *Kismet* | MGM (Freed Unit) | May 1955 | July 1955 | Dec. 1955 | Vincente Minnelli and Stanley Donen | Ann Blyth, Vic Damone, Howard Keel, Dolores Gray | Jack Cole |
| *Meet Me in Las Vegas* | MGM (Pasternak Unit) | Aug. 1955 | Oct. 1955 | March 1956 | Roy Rowland | Dan Dailey, Cyd Charisse | Hermes Pan, Eugene Loring |
| *Anything Goes* | Paramount | April 1955 | June 1955 | March 1956 | Robert Lewis | Bing Crosby, Donald O'Connor, Jeanmaire, Mitzi Gaynor | Nick Castle, Roland Petit |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *High Society* | MGM / Sol C. Siegel / Bing Crosby Productions | Jan. 1956 | March 1956 | July 1956 | Charles Walters | Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Celeste Holm, Grace Kelly | Charles Walters |
| *The Vagabond King* | Paramount | Dec. 1954 | Feb. 1955 | Aug. 1956 | Michael Curtiz | Oreste, Kathryn Grayson | Hanya Holm |
| *The Best Things in Life Are Free* | 20C Fox | April 1956 | June 1956 | Sept. 1956 | Michael Curtiz | Gordon MacRae, Sherrie North | Rod Alexander, Bill Foster |
| *The Girl Can't Help It* | 20C Fox | Sept. 1956 | Nov. 1956 | Dec. 1956 | Frank Tashlin | Various rock and roll groups (all in cameo performance) | *None* |
| *Funny Face* | Paramount | April 1956 | July 1956 | March 1957 | Stanley Donen | Fred Astaire, Audrey Hepburn, Kay Thompson | Fred Astaire, Hermes Pan |
| *Silk Stockings* | Arthur Freed Productions [MGM] | Nov. 1956 | Jan. 1957 | July 1957 | Rouben Mamoulian | Fred Astaire, Cyd Charisse | Fred Astaire, Eugene Loring |
| *The Pajama Game* | A George Abbott–Stanley Donen Production [Warner Bros.] | Nov. 1956 | Jan. 1957 | Aug. 1957 | George Abbott and Stanley Donen | Doris Day, John Raitt | Stanley Donen |
| *Les Girls* | Sol Siegel Productions [MGM] | Jan. 1957 | April 1957 | Oct. 1957 | George Cukor | Gene Kelly, Mitzi Gaynor | Jack Cole |
| *Gigi* | MGM (Freed Unit) | July 1957 | Oct. 1957 | May 1958 | Vincente Minnelli | Leslie Caron, Louis Jourdan, Maurice Chevalier | Charles Walters (uncredited) |

The Hollywood studios converted to widescreen formats for all releases rapidly and decisively in spring 1953. Prodded by declining movie attendance and the success of Cinerama (a widescreen format that did not present narrative features), Twentieth Century–Fox, among the major studios, took the lead in innovating a widescreen technology that could be applied across the industry. Fox demonstrated CinemaScope—an anamorphic process that yielded an aspect ratio of 2.55:1—at the Roxy Theatre in New York in late April 1953. Within weeks, MGM and Warner Bros. announced plans to release all future films in widescreen: commitments by both studios to CinemaScope followed a few months later. On September 16, 1953, Fox premiered the first CinemaScope feature: *The Robe*, an epic set in biblical times, enjoyed robust business in downtown movie theaters—the very large cinemas that accounted for most of the studios' income.[2]

When *The Robe* opened, two widescreen musicals were already in production: *Rose Marie* at MGM and *White Christmas* at Paramount. The latter, buttressed by Bing Crosby's star power, introduced Paramount's proprietary widescreen format: with a ratio of 1.85:1, VistaVision was wider and appreciably taller than CinemaScope—larger was as important as wider—and delivered very high picture quality. MGM hedged its CinemaScope bet and shot *Rose Marie*, as well as three more musicals that started shooting in late 1953 (*The Student Prince, Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, *Brigadoon*), in both CinemaScope and an in-house 1.75:1 aspect. Three further MGM musicals in only 1.75 were shot in early to mid-1954 (*Athena*, *Deep in My Heart*, *The Glass Slipper*); two more in only CinemaScope were in the can by the end of the year (*Jupiter's Darling*, *Hit the Deck*). MGM released six of this burst of nine widescreen musicals before the end of 1954. The other musical-making studios—like Paramount with *White Christmas*—produced far fewer during the first full year of widescreen: one each at Warner Bros. (*Lucky Me*, starring Doris Day) and Fox (*There's No Business Like Show Business*) and two at Columbia (*Three for the Show*, *My Sister Eileen*). A final 1954 musical offered a different financing model but used studio methods and talent: the Judy Garland vehicle *A Star Is Born* was an independent production, pieced together by Garland's husband Sidney Luft and financed in part by a distribution deal with Warner Bros.[3] The above fifteen widescreen musicals—made and all but five released by the end 1954—capture the genre at a moment of intense creative innovation in the presentation of the singing and dancing body on screen.[4]

Subsequent widescreen musical production never matched the intensity of 1954. Indeed, by 1957 the genre as an expression of the studio-made, classical Hollywood movie was sputtering out—if brilliantly so. MGM made only three in 1955 (*It's Always Fair Weather* [Gene Kelly's first in the format], *Kismet*, *Meet Me in Las Vegas*). Singletons from the other studios included Fox's *Daddy Long Legs* (Astaire's first widescreen film) and Warner Bros.' *Love Me or Leave Me* (again with Day and only one substantive dance number). Paramount, still working in VistaVision, made a lavish *Anything Goes* (again Crosby) and the operetta *The Vagabond King* (shot a full eighteen months before its 1956 debut—by which time it was already a relic). Independent producer Samuel Goldwyn bet on a film version of the Broadway smash *Guys and Dolls*—one of six relatively faithful adaptations of stage musicals and operettas in the corpus, which otherwise reflects the orientation of studio musical units toward original properties introducing new songs.

But the big event in musical film for 1955 was the roadshow premiere of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's historic Broadway hit *Oklahoma!* in yet another widescreen format: Todd-AO. Only nineteen narrative features have ever been released in Todd-AO: eight are musicals—none of which fall into the production context of the classical, studio-made genre. The other three Rodgers and Hammerstein stage musicals released in film versions in the period under discussion here (*Carousel*, *The King and I*, *South Pacific* [in Todd-AO]) were, like *Oklahoma!*, made outside the established production units of the major studios and fall outside the corpus analyzed here.

Musical releases from the studios declined further in 1956—a signal year in popular culture when a new kind of music (rock and roll) and a new musical film star (Elvis Presley) emerged on the national scene. Fox, Paramount, and MGM each released a film featuring Presley in the final years of the studio-made musical: none, however, was made by the historic musical production units at these studios. MGM's output fell precipitously to one: the singing-only, star-driven *High Society* (a co-production with Sol C. Siegel and Bing Crosby Productions).[5] Fox bet on both nostalgia (the Roaring Twenties musical biopic *The Best Things in Life Are Free* about the songwriting trio DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson) and the present (the rock-oriented *The Girl Can't Help It*, an attempt to integrate the new youth popular music into the studio genre): the former has but two dance numbers (both inventive); the latter—shot and released in three months—has none.

The studio-made musical featuring dance arguably ended in 1957 with a group of releases built on atypical production deals and creative teams that, nonetheless, tapped into studio-musical stalwarts. Astaire appeared in two: Paramount's *Funny Face* and MGM's *Silk Stockings*. The latter was billed, unusually, as an Arthur Freed Production; the former was made by MGM creatives (Stanley Donen, Roger Edens, Kay Thompson, Adolph Deutsch, Skip Martin, Conrad Salinger) using Paramount's VistaVision and leading star Audrey Hepburn. Kelly ended his Hollywood musical career in an MGM film choreographed by Jack Cole and co-produced by Siegel (who was everywhere in these twilight months): *Les Girls* is the only Kelly musical lacking a solo for the star. Warner Bros. distributed and lent its signature star, Doris Day, to *The Pajama Game*, a recent Broadway property produced for film by George Abbott (its New York director) and Stanley Donen—the pair shared the director credit as well—and featuring choreography by Bob Fosse (who had transitioned to Broadway from a brief career in Hollywood—most of it in widescreen—before the studio units closed up).

By 1958, the studio-made film musical came to an end as dedicated production units shut down. The genre, which found its enduring form in films like *Forty-Second Street* (Warner Bros., 1933) and *Top Hat* (RKO, 1935), rounded out its quarter-century history with the Oscar for Best Picture awarded to *Gigi*—another Arthur Freed Production at MGM.

The singing and dancing body in widescreen presents a paradox: objectively larger (potentially colossally so in a downtown movie palace) but contextually smaller (one body framed in full figure takes up very little of the total screen space)—compare, for example, Astaire alone and with partner in 1.37 (hereafter Academy) and in CinemaScope (Figures 4.1b and 4.2b). This new context for the cinematic performing body was met by widescreen musical makers with a set of distinct strategies repeated across the corpus and virtually all appearing in the initial group of musicals made in 1954. The extent to which the makers of these films were aware of each other's work in widescreen before each respective movie was shot, previewed, premiered, or released remains unknown—potential access to rehearsal rooms, soundstages, and dailies (especially at MGM) raises unsolvable issues of innovation and influence. Once widescreen releases began, these strategies emerged as distinctive tropes of the widescreen musical number—available for expressive use and reflexive and/or satirical reference. Many widescreen musical strategies can be understood within musical film history as aesthetically extreme; several communicate a sense of anxiety about the space widescreen required film makers to fill with song and dance.

The analysis that follows isolates specific strategies and identifies signal examples from across the corpus. All thirty-one films and some ninety-four musical numbers are mentioned, although certain films and numbers emerge as especially typical or self-referential responses to widescreen. First mention of a musical number includes the film from which it comes; subsequent mentions only reference the number. A set of eleven video essays, available on the website for this volume, include almost all the film moments mentioned in the text in the order discussed. While the clips were chosen to illustrate specific strategies, readers are encouraged to note the presence of multiple strategies in many of the clips: for example, the strategy of singing and dancing bodies "going horizontal" appears throughout and not just in the discussion of this fundamental widescreen strategy. The twenty figures isolate widescreen strategies in screen captures, often by way of comparison with the earlier Academy aspect ratio. Keep in mind the significant difference in the scale of the image in Academy and widescreen: performing bodies in widescreen films shown in first-run movie palaces were objectively larger than any seen in the Academy era.

## Internal Framing Objects (video essay 1)

Full figure framing was the default mode for dancing in the studio-made musical. Widescreen formats ranging from 1.75 (at MGM) to 2.55 (CinemaScope) increased the width of the screen from 22 to 86 percent. This left a surplus of space around the upright human body framed in full figure. Basic strategies to fill this extra space and create a sense of context for the performing body include internal framing structures, usually set pieces of some kind arranged symmetrically to either side, as well as designated performance areas that placed performers within a space itself set within the frame.

Framing objects vary in size and shape. When a solitary singer stands perfectly still, subtle framing structures can be enhanced by lighting, as in “Ten Cents a Dance” (*Love Me or Leave Me*), which centers star Doris Day in a spotlight with curving steps to either side. In “The Ritz Roll and Rock” (*Silk Stockings*), large mirrored boxes to either side (and a long bar at center discussed below) enclose the space of the number. Astaire briefly climbs the side of one mirror box, putting a framing object to choreographic use—an unusual occurrence. Similar balancing and scale-giving objects to the back and sides of the set are common and give abundant evidence for the urge to simply fill up the extra width—often otherwise just empty space. As discussed below, performers to either side of a star can also serve as framing structures.

Framing objects also appear in the foreground between the performers and the camera/viewer position. Tables to screen right and left framing a performer in a nightclub setting—sometimes empty, sometimes occupied by audience members seen from the back—are typical (“I’ll Get By” [*A Star Is Born*], “Cool It Baby!” [*The Girl Can’t Help It*]). Views through a window or a wall create literal frames for more pictorial effects (“Be Bop a Lula” [*The Girl Can’t Help It*], “Adelaide’s Lament” [*Guys and Dolls*]).

The urge for symmetry is everywhere evident in the above framing strategies, most of which effectively divide the screen into three sections, centering the performing body, whether singing or dancing. Framing structures dividing the screen into fourths or fifths also appear. A row of phone booths quarter the frame in the opening of *Guys and Dolls*. Esther Williams’s song and swim routine “I Have a Dream” (*Jupiter’s Darling*) unfolds around a curved, six-column portico that divides the space, above and below the water, into five equal-sized bays, each with a statue inside. The regular rhythm of this classically inspired structure works to frame any number of symmetrical setups—yielding several threefold compositions within the larger whole. A similar if smaller curve—seven doors framed by two desks—punctuates the space of “Think Pink” (*Funny Face*). None of these horizontally oriented sets would have been effective in Academy; all are driven by the need to divide a newly wide, comparatively low (in height) aspect ratio for the effective framing of the human form normatively presented in full figure—an aesthetic at the center of the studio musical that widescreen musical makers virtually all refused to abandon.

## DESIGNATED PERFORMANCE AREAS (VIDEO ESSAY 2)

Another common strategy to carve out a context for the performing figure in the generous width of widescreen was to create designated areas, often raised, which function as internal stages for song and dance. In her only widescreen appearance ("If You Believe," *Meet Me in Las Vegas*), Lena Horne stands atop a tiny platform. The problem, of course, is the lack of head room: framed as large as possible, the top of Horne's head is cut off a bit (a common occurrence for heads and feet across the corpus). Cutting between full figure and medium close-up provides variety in Horne's number but the sheer size of the widescreen image in the 1950s should be remembered when watching these films today on televisions, computers, or phones: Horne's image on the (very) big screen, even in full figure, was large enough for her facial features to be read.

Still, putting a single singing figure on a platform proves unusual. More commonly, a designated area functions as a space for solo or partner dancing. Three lengthy dance routines—"The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing" (*White Christmas*), "A Boy Chases a Girl" (*There's No Business Like Show Business*), "De-lovely" (*Anything Goes*)—each move between multiple designated dance areas that put the dancers into limited, often inventive, more human-scale contexts. In the first, Danny Kaye and Vera-Ellen move between a series of related areas—a raised patio, a covered bridge, a larger open area (framed by the previous two smaller areas), an upturned boat. Donald O'Connor climbs a gigantic vine to do a solo section of "A Boy Chases" on a rooftop. O'Connor and Mitzi Gaynor's "De-Lovely," danced on the deck of a luxury ocean liner, employs a slanted and curved element around a smokestack for the sung verse, then, during the dance, travels to a set of square skylights (which illuminate both singly from below), a smaller and higher area for some in-place soft shoe (and spoken banter), and even the ship's railing. In the above three routines, time spent dancing in each designated area generally maps on to musical form.

Various conspicuously long horizontal structures also lend shape to widescreen dances. Long bars or tables appear in several numbers ("Gone about that Girl," *Les Girls*; "Ritz Roll and Rock"; the kitchen dream in *The Glass Slipper*). The three drunk sailors in *It's Always Fair Weather* flag down and dance on, in, and around a taxi cab—its articulated form fits CinemaScope nicely while leaving room for all three to dance as well as explore the various ways in and out of the vehicle.

Larger structures set within vast empty soundstages serve similar if more varied purposes in *Three for the Show* and *The Glass Slipper.* In the former's dream ballet to music by Tchaikovsky, a huge stepped platform provides a massive staging ground for numerous inventive compositions, camera angles, and, unusual (for the corpus), diagonal divisions of the screen. A gigantic layer cake in *The Glass Slipper* provides Caron with a confined space at the top for a delicate dance of precise on pointe footwork and a curving ledge on the lower layers custom-made for a series of *fouette* turns.

In more naturalistic numbers, designated spaces for dance open up between selectively placed pieces of furniture ("Waiting for My Dearie" [*Brigadoon*], "Too Bad" [*Silk Stockings*], among many).

All the above framing structures and designated areas work to take up space on the set and on the screen—helping ameliorate the problem of the performing body getting lost in the width of widescreen.

## LATERAL MOVEMENT; ENTERING AND EXITING ON THE VERTICALS (VIDEO ESSAY 3)

The width of widescreen created challenges for the movement of bodies faced by all widescreen filmmakers. Lateral motion is prominent in *The Robe* and in widescreen musicals as well. The Canadian Mounties in *Rose Marie* march across the screen rather than toward the viewer, as in the same song in the 1936 version (Figures 4.3a and 4.3b). Similar lateral motion on a monumental scale occurs whenever Hannibal's armies and elephants show up in *Jupiter's Darling*, a film that, like *Rose Marie*, attempts to bring the epic scale of location shooting in a grand natural setting to a genre that, prior to widescreen, remained resolutely indoors. Director Vincente Minnelli exploited the pictorial potential of sustained lateral motion in "Night of My Nights" (*Kismet*). A slow procession moves right to left, with some contrary motion by walking figures carrying sparkler-bright branches; on the repeat of the chorus, the camera pulls back to reveal the entire procession doubled in the still-waters of an adjacent canal. Minnelli makes visually novel use of the screen time opened up by song to double down on the already challenging horizontality of CinemaScope. The defining identity of the musical as a commercial film genre hosting semi-autonomous musical numbers makes this sustained exploitation of widescreen space possible.

Simply making an entrance or exit in widescreen proves a challenge: it takes time to cover the distance from the edge to the center, especially in full to medium figure framing. The strategy of lateral camera motion following a singer walking down a busy street occurs in the first numbers of both *Lucky Me* and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*: Doris Day and Howard Keel respectively encounter others naturally along their way.

The strategy of entering at or near center screen by means of a vertical barrier, usually a wall, proves common. It's a quick way to get Debbie Reynolds into "Loo Loo" (*Hit the Deck*). Astaire and Cyd Charisse travel from set to set in "Fated to Be Mated" (*Silk Stockings*) by way of a large, swinging lift, but convenient archways and walls boost them into the center of two successive dance settings (each with designated dance areas: in the first, a round platform; in the second, a variety of nautical-themed apparatuses that welcome climbing and swinging). Curtain walls in a Russian palace converted to Communist apartments in "The Red Blues" (also *Silk Stockings*) allows an entire chorus to quickly appear in response to the sound of jazz. Tossing the curtains aside yields abundant open space for an energetic, space-filling dance number. "Hell Hath No Fury" (*Meet Me in Las Vegas*), a rare asymmetrical number, situates singer Frankie Laine to lower screen right, balanced dynamically by four female dancers to upper screen left. Each dancer has her own wall that allows for selective and instantaneous entrances—first an arm, then a leg, then a head, etc.

The stylized nature of the genre allowed for expressive use of vertical barriers unlikely to be found in non-musical films. One standout example from *A Star Is Born*—a film filled with striking compositions: during the "Born in a Trunk" narrative, an entirely red screen opens from center on Garland in an elevator full of creepy mannequins.

## ENTRANCE AND EXIT ON HORIZONTAL SET ELEMENTS (VIDEO ESSAY 4)

Among the widescreen strategies almost entirely absent in Academy musicals are entrances and exits made on the horizontals—whether by way of internal set elements or use of the top and bottom of the frame. The Hot Box girls reach through, peek, and climb over a fence that forms a horizontal division in "Pet Me Papa" (*Guys and Dolls*). (Note how the proscenium arch of the Hot Box stage exactly matches the CinemaScope ratio; such structures are reliably extra wide in widescreen.) The entire company of "The Gal with the Yaller Shoes" (*Meet Me in Las Vegas*) exits simultaneously by leaping head first over a stone wall, only to pop back up (on a cut) for a final comic look. Debbie Reynolds and Jane Powell similarly pop up to join Kay Armen in the finale of *Hit the Deck*. Earlier in the film, chorus boys playing sailors (and sailors hiding from shore patrol) prepare behind, then climb up and over a platform to enter the stage number "Loo Loo," giving the film audience a glimpse of how this strategy works and leaving the three heroes of the film still concealed (for now).

Techniques for entrances through the floor borrowed from the theater also appear in the corpus. "Thanks a Lot but No Thanks" (*It's Always Fair Weather*), a veritable index of extreme widescreen strategies, has individual men pop out of traps in the floor and, at the close, Dolores Gray dumps the entire company of men down a massive hinged trapdoor. During the multi-part "Alexander's Ragtime Band" routine, a visible circular elevator trap facilitates repeated and efficient entrances and exits at center screen singly and in pairs by the Five Donahues. "Mandy" in *White Christmas* similarly brings on Vera-Ellen without showing the trap.

But at the end of "Alexander's," the Five Donahues must exit together in a line stretching across the full width of the frame. Too wide for the trap, they instead march confidently forward down an unseen flight of stairs, exiting along a horizontal barrier (a water feature) otherwise unseen in the number and unlikely to find any analogy in theatrical stagecraft. A similar obscured stairway, this time at the back of the set, structures successive entrances in the "Blow, Gabriel Blow" finale to *Anything Goes*: the four stars, each with their own backup dancers, enter in turn up a hidden stairway at the back, move forward, then exit screen right (where a curtain boosts their exit mid-screen). Entrance or exit down a visible stairway occurs in relation to the real built environment as well: a portal to the subway helps fill the screen with motion in *Guys and Dolls*' stylized re-creation of Times Square.

Entrance from the top of the screen by way of internal structures can be stylized (in *Daddy Long Legs*' "Papillon" dream, ballet dancers descend a circular stairway that extends above a painted drop—again borrowing from the theater) or practical (in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*' barn raising, three suitors steal the partners of three Pontipee brothers by dropping down from a nearby roof). Charisse enters the dance in "The Gal with the Yaller Shoes" by raising her arms: an unseen man in the tree above plucks her abruptly into the leafy branches. Dan Dailey, surprised by her disappearance, registers relief when she re-enters by leaping from the tree. Charisse's exit and entrance both occur center screen.

The simple conceit of an internal structure used for horizontal entrance and exit comes in for satirical demonstration in "Stereophonic Sound" (*Silk Stockings*): Janis Paige lies down on a piano lid; Astaire lifts a horizontal section of the lid—similar in proportions to the CinemaScope screen—to completely obscure her; then Paige pops up, entering instantly at center screen. This bit of staging nicely matches the sardonic tone of Cole Porter's lyrics about mid-1950s widescreen hype. More theatrical than cinematic, horizontal structures facilitating entrance and exit within the frame call attention to themselves as clever contrivances.

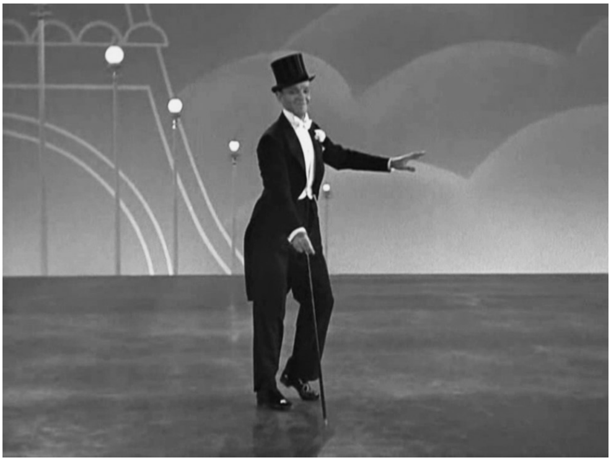

**FIGURE 4.1A** Fred Astaire in *Top Hat* (1935). In Academy, one dancer can fill the space and move freely.

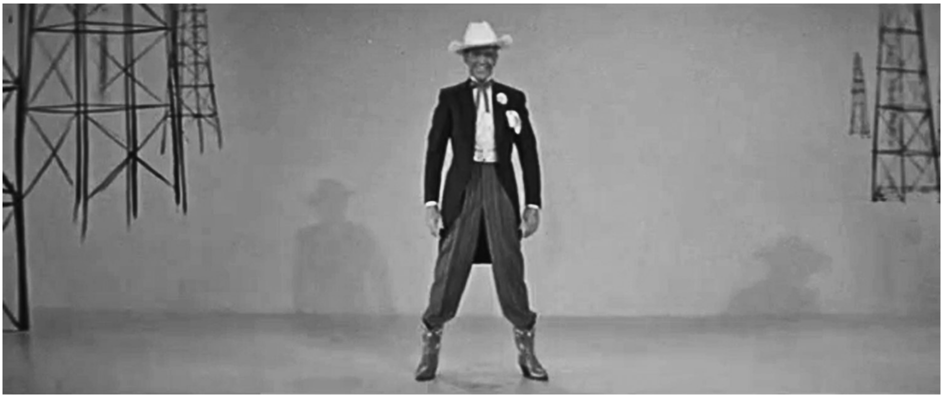

**FIGURE 4.1B** Astaire in *Daddy Long Legs* (1956). In CinemaScope, the larger lone figure faces too much space.

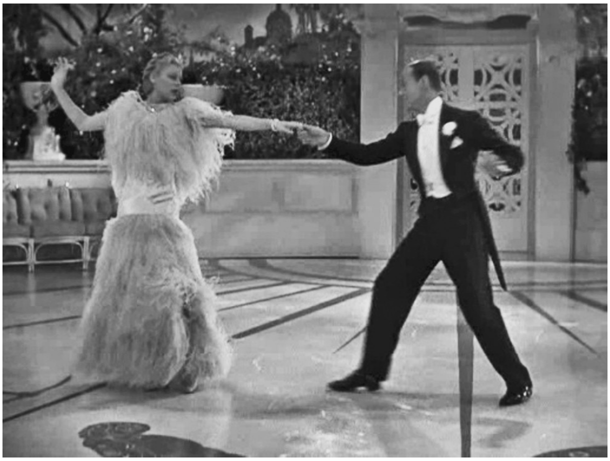

**FIGURE 4.2A** Astaire and Rogers in *Top Hat*. Almost always within arm's length of each other, Academy seems made for partner dancing captured in full figure.

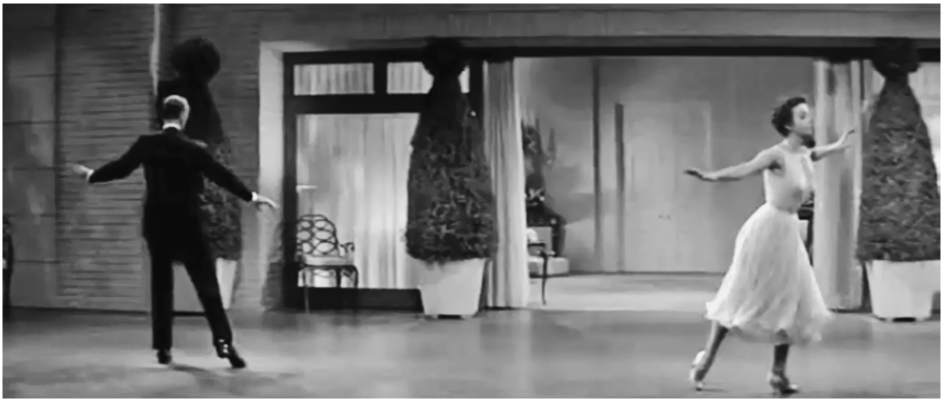

**FIGURE 4.2B** Astaire and Caron in *Daddy Long Legs*. In CinemaScope, partners might well lose each other – although the tension of separation followed by return finds new expressive room.

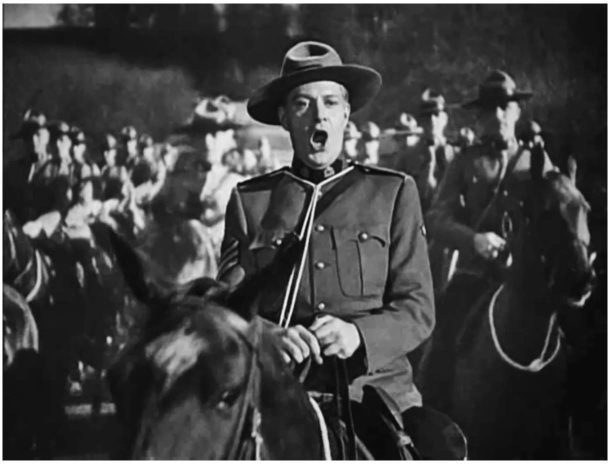

**FIGURE 4.3A** Nelson Eddy advances ever forward with his men in "The Mounties Song" (*Rose Marie*, 1936).

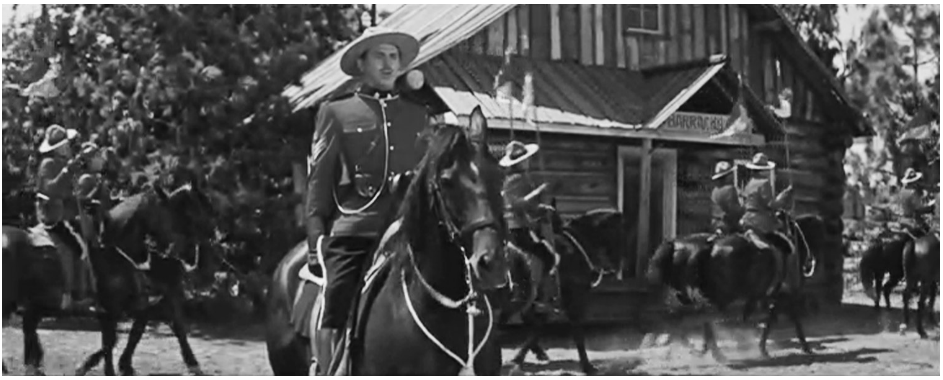

**FIGURE 4.3B** Howard Keel and his men move laterally, with flags on poles marking their progress in the same song as made for CinemaScope (*Rose Marie*, 1954).

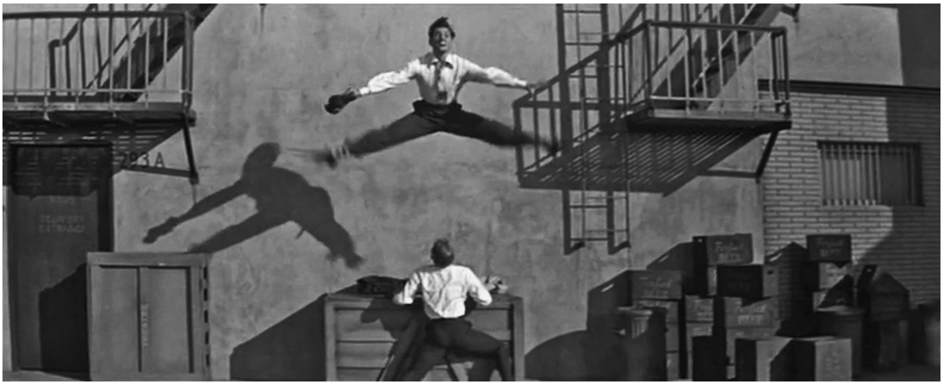

**FIGURE 4.4A** Huge leaps typify Bob Fosse's choreography for the "Alley Dance" (*My Sister Eileen*, 1955).

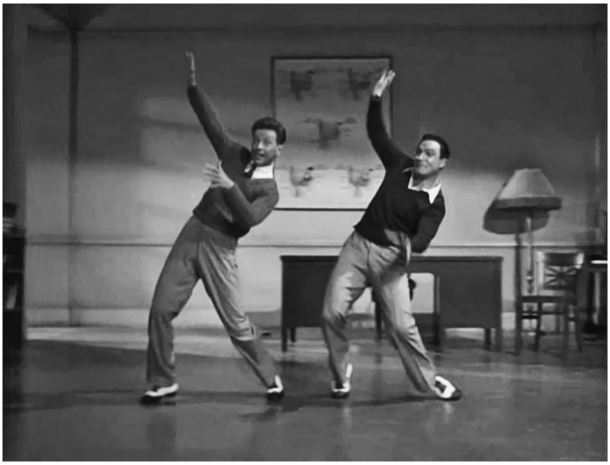

**FIGURE 4.4B** Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor stay close to each other and execute fairly constrained movements throughout the tap duo "Moses Supposes" (*Singin' in the Rain*, 1952).

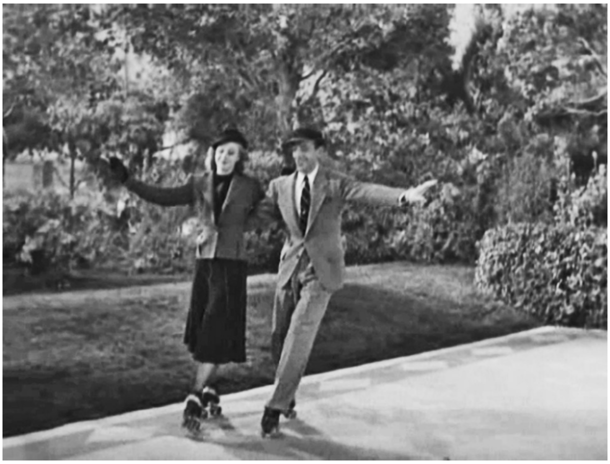

**FIGURE 4.5A** Astaire and Rogers' roller skating routine "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off" circles round and round a modest rink in a park (*Shall We Dance*, 1937).

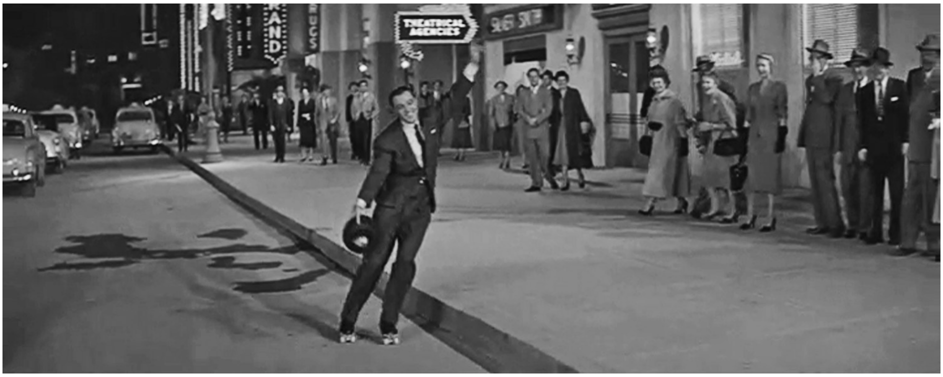

**FIGURE 4.5B** Gene Kelly covers much more ground while skating through the city in "I Like Myself" (*It's Always Fair Weather*, 1956).

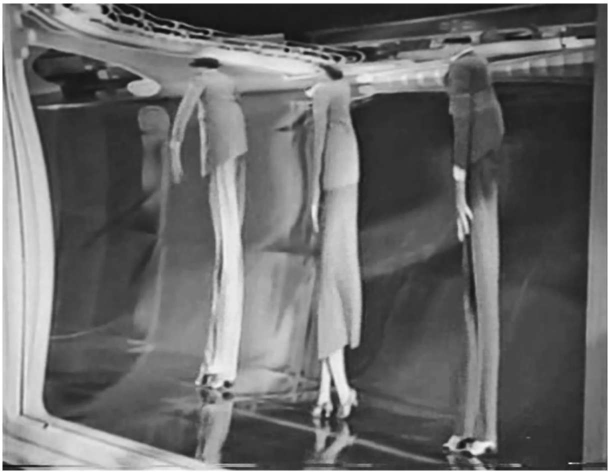

**FIGURE 4.6A** Hermes Pan fits three tall figures into an Academy-size funhouse mirror in *A Damsel in Distress* (1937).

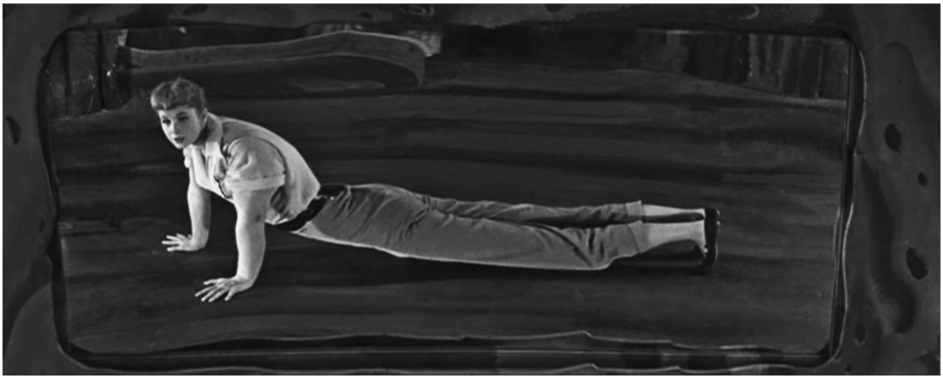

**FIGURE 4.6B** Pan re-orients the mirror for CinemaScope, stretching Debbie Reynolds into a typical example of the widescreen tendency to "go horizontal" (*Hit the Deck*, 1956).

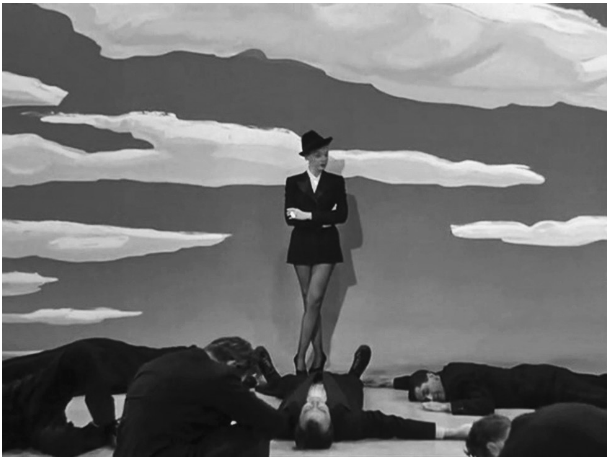

**FIGURE 4.7A** A rare moment of dancers gone horizontal in Academy ("Get Happy" from *Summer Stock*, 1950).

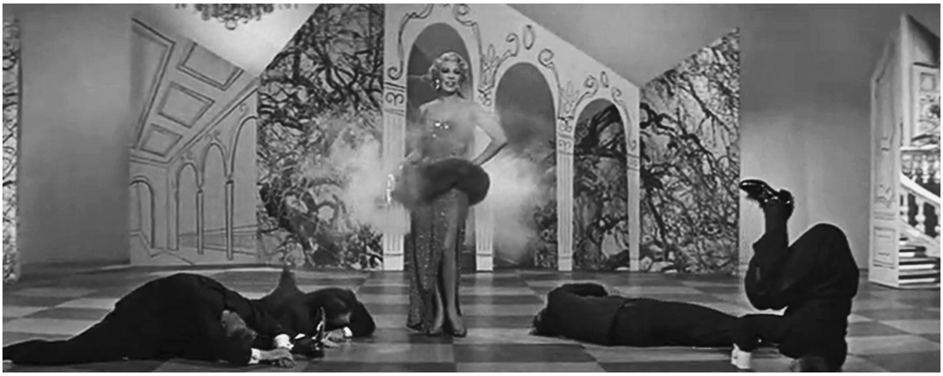

**FIGURE 4.7B** A typical moment of several dancers laying full out on the floor in widescreen ("Thanks A Lot but No Thanks" from *It's Always Fair Weather*).

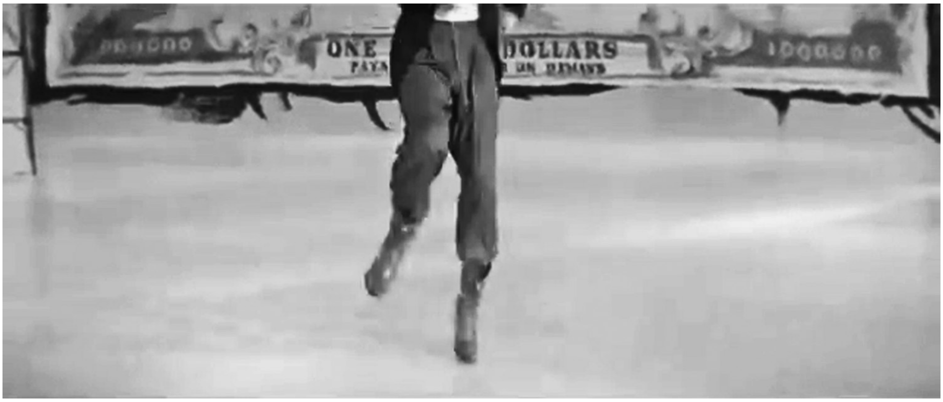

**FIGURE 4.8A** Searching for new ways to frame the body: a strange moment in Astaire's first widescreen film (*Daddy Long Legs*).

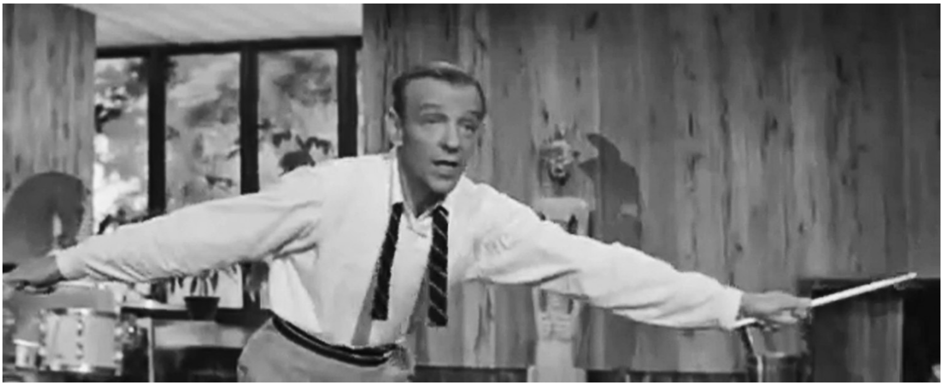

**FIGURE 4.8B** Arms as wide as the screen: an unprecedented cut to medium closeup on the final chord of Astaire's "The History of the Beat" (*Daddy Long Legs*).

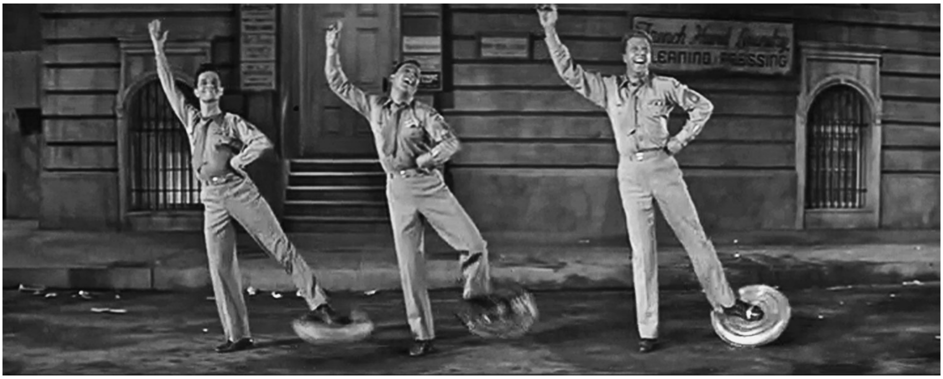

**FIGURE 4.9A** Plenty of room for three jubilant men to dance side by side in CinemaScope (*It's Always Fair Weather*).

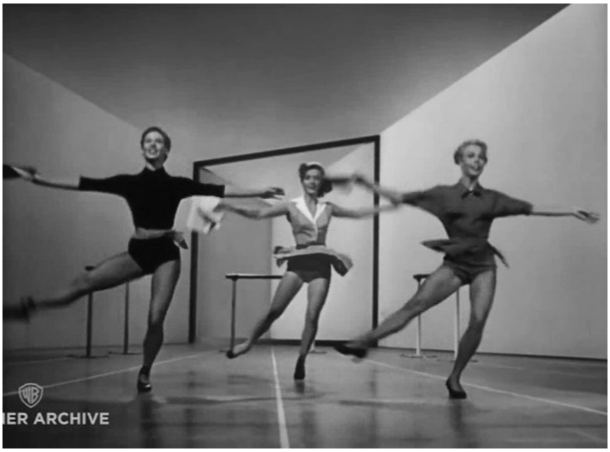

**FIGURE 4.9B** Equally large movements by three young women force one dancer behind the others in Academy (*Give a Girl a Break*, 1953).

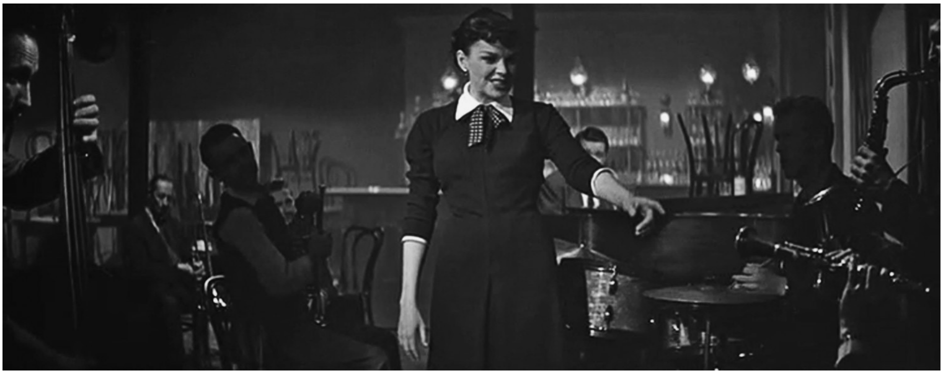

**FIGURE 4.10A** Framed by instruments, Judy Garland points at the clarinet as it plays a lick in "The Man That Got Away" (*A Star is Born*, 1954).

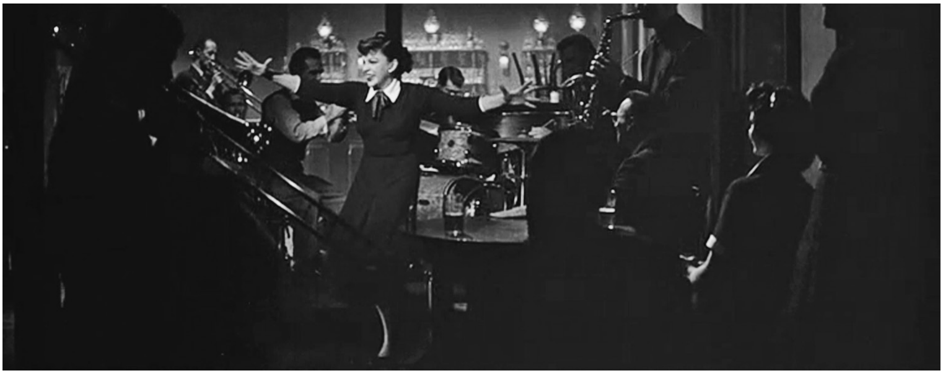

**FIGURE 4.10B** Garland framed by many figures near the end of the same song, with two attentive listeners seated and listening to screen right—filling the space as needed to balance the composition.

## CROSSING THE HORIZONTAL EDGES OF THE FRAME (VIDEO ESSAY 5)

An inherently cinematic strategy for efficient entrance or exit on the horizontals employs the upper and lower edges of the frame itself. The aesthetic uses of such movement prove varied across the corpus: in short, crossing the horizontals—a genuinely new staging choice—opened novel expressive resources quite specific to the technological context of widescreen formats.

Some crossings of the horizontal frame edge repeat strategies using horizontal set pieces: at the end of *There's No Business Like Show Business*, the Five Donahues repeat their move down an unseen staircase, but this time they exit at the edge of the frame—no visible structure required. On a transition to the film's title song in the same shot, a multitude of performers in rows descend a wide staircase: entering up the back (as in "Blow, Gabriel Blow") and exiting, as the Donahues did, at screen bottom. The inexhaustible plentitude of American entertainment is expressed in this top to bottom movement of multitudes. Movement by performers across the lower edge of the frame can be a repeated structural element (the stars who exit screen right in "Blow, Gabriel Blow" repeatedly re-enter from unseen steps at front) or a chaotic expression of energy (several Mulvain sisters in *Athena*'s "I Never Felt Better" boldly charge across the lower frame edge; others happily roll in on ottomans) or a startlingly intimate surprise (twice the four backup dancers in "Love, You Didn't Do Right by Me" [*White Christmas*] pop up to instantly surround singer Rosemary Clooney).

Moving across the horizontal can also be transformative. Late in *Daddy Long Legs*, Caron enters her own dream by walking across the lower horizontal and into the shot. In the earlier "Guardian Angel" dream, Caron, chased by Astaire, exits on the lower horizontal by running forward (just past the camera) and, on a cut, immediately enters across the lower horizontal (again just past the camera)—a match on action that violates the 180-degree rule that keeps all action on one side of the camera. Astaire had never made such a move in his previous twenty-six films. This characteristic widescreen movement takes the dancers from one setting to another and one dreamscape to another, functioning as a fresh replacement for the blurry crossfade of Academy dream sequences.

A combination of horizontal crossings unfolds slowly in *Brigadoon*'s entrance of the clans. The first clan emerges from below up an unseen hill (a concealed ramp) in the middle of the screen. The group slowly marches directly forward, exiting on the screen right half of the lower horizontal. Individual figures seem to walk directly into the camera, a reminder that widescreen formats were marketed as delivering an immersive 3D experience with no glasses required.

Entrance across the top horizontal proves as simple as a tilt of the camera: for her feature in *The Girl Can't Help It*, singer Abbey Lincoln first appears in a murky reflection on the floor. The camera tilts up to frame her in the manner of Lena Horne and Doris

Day described earlier: a lone female singer center screen. Lincoln "exits" on a rhyming camera tilt downward. Like Day and Horne, Lincoln never takes a step. Such stylized camera moments find a welcome home in the musical, which can exploit widescreen in decorative ways perhaps not open to other genres.

The reflexive number "Thanks a Lot but No Thanks" pushes these horizontal frame edge tropes to the limit, calling attention to and perhaps lampooning the technique. Gray starts the number by assembling a group of chorus boys. The first two charge in across the lower horizontal—running by either side of the camera—and execute a forward flip along the way (one of many such extreme physical moves discussed below). The final three drop from above and land in a fully prone horizontal position (another extreme posture considered further). These seemingly over-the-top entrances speak to the virtuosity of the dancing seen in many widescreen films. Extreme aesthetics work simultaneously in this number and elsewhere as surprising (perhaps comic) overstatement, as exploration of new screen space (the top and bottom horizontals), and as displays of undeniable physical skill (dancers doing outsize moves). By any of these readings, the bigger, wider screen called for bigger, more kinetic dancing. Later in "Thanks a Lot," Gray gleefully ignites an explosion that launches three chorus boys off screen top: a cut conceals the replacement of actual dancers with mannequins (hinting at the shot-by-shot creation of musical numbers).

Like most widescreen tropes, crossing the top and bottom horizontals in the fanciful realm of the number dates to the initial 1954 cohort. Indeed, in "Choreography" from *White Christmas*, tap dancers Vera-Ellen and John Brascia enter respectively by descending slowly from above and popping up quickly from below, both times spooking the modern dancers led by Danny Kaye. These intrusions from previously unknown directions signal in no uncertain terms the new spatial regime of the widescreen musical and give evidence for musical film makers' sense that something new must be done with performing bodies to mark the genre's transition in aspect and screen size.

## Faster, Larger Movement (video essay 6)

Large, fast, full-body movements are typical of much widescreen dancing. Michael Kidd's barn raising dance from *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*—filled with acrobatic flips and vertical lifts—declared as much from the start of the widescreen era.[6] Dancers in widescreen regularly make larger motions than those commonly seen in Academy. For example, Bob Fosse choreographed and danced the "Alley Dance" in *My Sister Eileen* with Tommy Rall (a *Seven Brides* brother). While Fosse's signature slouched postures are evident, equally noteworthy is the way the two men take up space by covering much ground at great speed, kicking their legs explosively, reaching with fully extended arms, and leaping to great heights (while always staying within the frame). They end the routine with casually tossed-off, unprepared back flips. This double dance could not have been contained in Academy, and, like Kidd's barn-raising, typifies how widescreen opened a place in the studio musical for youthful, strong, technically accomplished male dancers with tumbling skills. (For a late Academy era contrast to the "Alley Dance," consider Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor's tightly contained "Moses Supposes" [*Singin' in the Rain*, 1952]—Figures 4.4a and 4.4b.)

Once again, Astaire and Paige's "Stereophonic Sound" reflexively performs this widescreen strategy. Working off Porter's lyric—which notes that it's no longer enough "to see a dancer at his ease" but that full-body moves, like "sliding on his knees," are required—Astaire and Paige, in just one of many similar silly moves, execute fully extended, rapid arm swings that try too hard to fill as much space as possible. "Thanks a Lot but No Thanks"—another catalog of extreme strategies—has multiple chorus boys enter the number by running, sliding, some flipping their way around the still center point of Gray. All show a precise sense for where the (to the dancers invisible) edges of the frame are. This sensitivity to the location of the dancing body within the limits of the frame had informed the best screen dancing for decades. Widescreen allowed for such awareness to be demonstrated with evident virtuosity.

Moving the human figure at faster speeds brought speed-enhancing apparatuses into several numbers, increasing the dynamism of movement in a genre grounded on bodies in motion. The contrast between Academy and widescreen comes out in two numbers that put dancers on roller skates: In "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off" (*Shall We Dance*, 1937), Astaire and Rogers skate in a comparatively tight circle (Figure 4.5a). In "I Like Myself" (*It's Always Fair Weather*), Gene Kelly travels laterally within an expansive streetscape—albeit still within a soundstage (Figure 4.5b). Attaching dancers to cables for even faster lateral movement occurs in "The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing" and "If This Be Slavery" (*Jupiter's Darling*). The former frames such movement gracefully along a covered bridge that earlier served as a designated dance area; the latter—ending the number with a crash—communicates chaos: the power of camera angle in widescreen to differently characterize rapid motion is evident. And, again, "Stereophonic Sound" riffs on the strategy, ending with Astaire and Paige swinging suddenly and directly forward on a chandelier that appears from nowhere. They stick the landing nicely and, appropriately, on their knees with arms out.

## Going Horizontal (video essay 7)

But perhaps the most extreme way musical makers found to put the performing body into the wider context was by laying it down: going horizontal—treating the body as a horizontal topic—suddenly starts happening again and again, especially in films released after 1954. Perhaps the makers of the initial cohort of widescreen musicals weren't ready to go to such lengths. Choreographer Hermes Pan, however, was: he comically elongated Debby Reynolds's diminutive frame in a funhouse mirror in *Hit the*

*Deck* (within a sequence that horizontally reworks multiple gags from Pan's previous funhouse ["Stiff Upper Lip," *Damsel in Distress*, 1937], where distorting mirrors instead squeeze three tall figures into Academy—Figures 4.6a and 4.6b).

Pan's sideways and stretched-out Reynolds was a typical reaction to framing the performing body in widescreen. For example, four love duets lay their lovers down ("True Love," *High Society*; "Ça, C'est l'Amour," *Les Girls*; "Bored," *Kismet*; "All through the Night," *Anything Goes*). Three ballads of reflective romantic longing sung by female leads in their bedrooms similarly feature a woman singing while stretched out on a bed ("Which One?," *Three for the Show*; "Lucky Bird," *Hit the Deck*; "Hey, There," *The Pajama Game*). A stage full of women puts this trope of widescreen femininity on a nightclub stage in "Keeping Myself" (*Hit the Deck*). Notably, no lone men lie down to sing in widescreen.

In dance numbers, male and female dancers hit the deck with abandon and apparent ease. Such full falls to the floor—virtually unknown in and hard to fit into Academy (Figure 4.7a)—carry an array of expressive meanings while strategically taking up as much horizontal space as possible. The "International Playboy" dream in *Daddy Long Legs* repeats the same gag over and over: every woman who encounters and is rejected by Astaire simply falls to the ground. He blithely steps over several. In their pas de deux to "The Birth of the Blues" (*The Best Things in Life Are Free*), Sheree North, after being kissed by Jacques d'Amboise, drops slowly to the floor and lies at her lover's feet. *Meet Me in Las Vegas*'s "Frankie and Johnny" ballet adds an aggressive edge to this pose, with the standing lover dragging the prone one in a sign of sexual enthrallment: Frankie (Charisse) is dragged by Johnny (Brascia); Johnny, in turn, is dragged by the woman with whom he cheats on Frankie (Liliane Montevecchi).

The horizontal body can also be found suspended in the air. In a sexy pas de cinq in a *Daddy Long Legs* dream, Caron, assisted by two men, walks across the horizontal body of a third. At the start of "If This Be Slavery," Gower Champion hangs from his chains, at first over Esther Williams, then over Marge Champion. Horizontal bodies are also tossed in the air ("Viva la You, Viva la Me" [*The Vagabond Prince*], but one among many).

However, horizontal dance isn't always violent: at the close of the second ballet in *The Glass Slipper*, Caron performs an extended dance of grief, rolling painfully and slowly down a set of steps. Her body fills the screen. A dance of such small details and limited movement would not work on the stage, and dancers did not lie on the floor in this way in Academy. Caron's dance—created by Roland Petit—demonstrates the expressive range of on-the-floor dancing in widescreen.

But most horizontal moments in widescreen musicals are more active than intimate. Multiple dancers roll down hills in Fosse's "Once a Year Day" (*The Pajama Game*, among the earliest Hollywood routines to use rapid cutting between different dancers—an approach typical of MTV decades later). Two Astaire numbers connect frenetic body-on-the-floor postures with rock and roll. In "Clap Yo' Hands" (*Funny Face*), Astaire executes a teeth-clenching, slow-motion crawl and roll combination while clutching a guitar, the camera angling above. Much of "Ritz Roll and Rock" involves fast and complete falls to the floor by Astaire and the men and women of the chorus, the latter in full-length gowns. By the end, everyone is full out on the floor—given the number's position at the very end of his last studio film, it's an odd farewell to the studio musical for Astaire, too easily read as satiric desperation at the onslaught of the new popular music. However, by 1957 such floor work was standard in widescreen and there is little sense of satire here beyond the positing of a class gap being filled by the rich going slumming: a tale as old as time in American popular culture.

A satiric take on going horizontal can, however, be found in "Stereophonic Sound." During their dance, Astaire and Paige find themselves at either end of a very long table (an ideal type of the designated dance structure, it has a conspicuously wide opening at the bottom that, of course, Paige and Astaire crawl through). The couple reach toward each other from either end of the table (and screen) with mock longing, then grasp the sides of the table and drag their way—bellies on the table—to a labored reunion. Once together, the pair pops up into a pose then immediately drops back to a horizontal position on the tabletop. Smiling in a forced manner all the while, Paige and Astaire perform the extreme physicality of widescreen dance while also signaling just how exhausting all this up and down is.

Casually and repeatedly dropping to the floor is utterly unusual in the history of the studio musical. For example, prior to his partner dance with Charisse in *Silk Stockings* ("All of You), where he lowers her briefly and casually to the floor, Astaire had virtually never in any of his previous almost seventy romantic duo dances allowed his partner's rear to touch the floor.[7] Yet by the end of the short widescreen studio-musical era, using the floor as more than a surface to stand on was completely normal. Indeed, the overwhelming horizontality of widescreen seems to encourage lying down whenever a suitable surface presents itself—as Garland does on the mantel of her modernist mansion in "Somewhere There's a Someone" (*A Star Is Born*) and as just about anyone does in the presence of a piano ("Never Felt Better"; "I Refuse to Rock and Roll" [*Meet Me in Las Vegas*], and Audrey Hepburn in "Basal Metabolism" [*Funny Face*]). Hepburn's final eccentric move in the last of these involves falling backwards and going horizontal on a row of three convenient laps.

Dances for only one dancer pose a problem in widescreen: the ratio loves multiple bodies. Consider Astaire in his first widescreen film: his two solos in *Daddy Long Legs* reveal a film dancer and dancemaker trying, perhaps desperately, to fill the space by himself. The "Texas Millionaire" sequence isolates Astaire in a vast, empty, yellow space where the proportions of a billboard-sized $1,000,000 bill match the CinemaScope frame. Astaire's first moves involve huge steps and arm extensions fully out to the sides. During the dance to fiddle music that follows, the camera tilts down and pushes in on his red cowboy boots: no previous Astaire routine takes an interest in his feet in this way—it's a genuinely odd moment and would have been felt as such by any devoted Astaire fan on initial release (Figure 4.8a). The majority of "The History of the Beat" frames Astaire in full figure either between or on furniture—a conveniently long coffee table briefly acts as a designated dance area—but on the final chord, the image cuts to frame Astaire from the waist up, his outstretched arms filling the frame (Figure 4.8b). No previous dance in Astaire's career ends this way, with a cut away from the full figure on the final chord. The challenge of filling the space, especially for a detail-oriented, always "at his ease" dancer like Astaire, is everywhere evident in these routines.

## The Rule of Three (video essay 8)

Even partner dances—romantic and not—have difficulty filling the generous space of widescreen (Figures 4.2b and 4.4a). An abundance of narrative, musical, and visual triplet configurations in the widescreen corpus show novel ways to ameliorate this issue. *Les Girls* follows three female performers; *The Best Things in Life Are Free* and *It's Always Fair Weather* alike center on three male friends. Periodically in the latter, the screen is divided into equal thirds, with each man framed in a different real or conceptual location. There's even room to dance in these thirds, provided the moves are subtle and small, as in "Up in Smoke," which frames each man—all are equally skilled dancers—in full figure, the camera following their movements precisely as in the Academy era. "Bonjour, Paris!" (*Funny Face*) repeats this approach in VistaVision, where a triple division of the marginally less wide screen leaves too little room for dance in full figure. *Hit the Deck* develops three romantic couples: besides the many solos and duets needed to feature six principals, the three men and three women each share a single-sex version of the song "Why, Oh Why." The men sing their version in a theater alley and arrange themselves into various poses, including one where Russ Tamblyn goes horizontal. The women's version is simpler: staged along a curved bench, solo vocal lines are used by each to reshuffle their order, creating a stable but constantly changing picture within a song-length shot. *Guys and Dolls* takes the same rearrangement approach in its title song, which, though a duet in the Broadway original, becomes a trio in the film with the addition of Nathan Detroit (Frank Sinatra).

Trios of equally skilled dancers easily fit and fill the wide screen. In *It's Always Fair Weather*'s extended and energetic street dance, all three men dance for much of the time in a line. The width of CinemaScope provides ample room for their large movements. (By contrast, the three girls featured in the 1953 MGM musical *Give a Girl a Break*, among the last Academy musicals, must dance in a triangle formation—with one placed a bit behind the others—to fit similarly exuberant moves within the frame [Figures 4.9a and 4.9b]). Indeed, CinemaScope contains room enough for both a trio of Marge and Gower Champion dancing with a baby elephant and another with Gower riding and commanding three adult elephants ("The Life of an Elephant," *Jupiter's Darling*). A less patterned approach to staging threesomes within intimate interior spaces is evident in both "Basal Metabolism", which follows Hepburn and two French hipsters' idiosyncratic individual movements through a crowded Montmartre club, and "The Night They Invented Champagne" (*Gigi*), which places Caron, Louis Jourdan, and Hermione Gingold in a richly detailed mise-en-scène, their movements continually recomposed by Charles Walters (uncredited) in a song-length shot which—like Astaire's red boots—oddly tilts down for a moment on the women's feet.

The sexual possibilities of a threesome are seldom explored in widescreen. However, Jeanmaire's dance with two sailors in her Times Square ballet (*Anything Goes*) hints at such possibilities, and Betty Grable's male harem daydream in *Three for the Show* riffs comically on the notion in relation to the film's plot.

## FOUR, FIVE, SEVEN, NINE . . . (VIDEO ESSAY 9)

Widescreen easily accommodates (many) more than three performers.

Groups of four are somewhat common, at times with physical elements expanding each individual's body size: playing cards for the Four Aces who start off *Meet Me in Las Vegas*, balloons with faces for the quartet who sing "The Blue Bells of Broadway" (*Lucky Me*), wide fake bodies for the foursome exiting "Gee, I Wish I Was Back in the Army" (*White Christmas*). "You're the Top" (*Anything Goes*) stages two simultaneous duos by the film's four stars—mismatched as to their ultimate romantic partners. This double duet moves by cut and track between adjacent rehearsal rooms on an ocean liner. At the end, the camera pulls back to show both rooms and couples and reveals a wide set only appropriate in widescreen.

Odd numbers of performers, however, appear more often, especially in star-centered diegetic numbers (of which there are many). In such routines, multiple performers to either side of the star act as human internal framing structures. Two bodies to each side of the star—a total of five performers—offers a minimum as seen in "Love, You Didn't Do Right by Me" and "You'd Be Surprised" (*There's No Business Like Show Business*). "Thanks a Lot but No Thanks" puts four widely spaced framing dancers to work doing repeated forward flips to either side of Gray, who ends the shot (and the musical phrase) by shooting each in turn: the dancers, of course, fall to full horizontal poses on the floor in another of this number's significantly over-the-top uses of extreme widescreen strategies (Figure 4.7b).

Non-star-centered dances for five offer inventive examples that respond to the wide space of widescreen. Choreographer Jack Cole's dance for the three princesses of Ababu and two random men from the streets of Baghdad (*Kismet*) effectively deploys a "full house" arrangement of five: two men and three women dancing in interlocking patterns enhanced by highly contrasting costuming for the two groups. The narrative prelude to "Black Bottom" in *The Best Things in Life Are Free* pauses for a game of telephone that would have engaged the 1950s moviegoer's head: five figures sit in a row, at one end a gangster, at the other end the girl he wants, and between them three of the gangster's henchmen. Messages are sent between the gangster and girl in a seated dance of hand and facial gestures: following this in a movie palace in 1956 might have entailed turning one's head.

Star-centered routines using seven, eleven, thirteen, or seventeen performers occur across the corpus: subtract one (the star) from each of the above odd numbers, then divide by two to find the number of dancers arranged to either side of the star in the most common, symmetrical patterns. Seven minus Ann Miller leaves three chorus girls or three chorus boys on either side in Miller's two nightclub routines in *Hit the Deck*: the former, "Keeping Myself," uses platforms to anchor the girls like parentheses on either side of the star; the latter, "Lady from the Bayou," deploys the men in frenetic and varied arrangements. Seventeen minus Mitzi Gaynor in the title number from *Anything Goes* allows for eight women and eight men to flexibly frame the star—Gaynor with just the men or just the women (in either case nine are in the dance), Gaynor with six men for a specific lift, all seventeen, or Gaynor alone. Thirteen minus Astaire in "Ritz Roll and Rock" leaves two women to either side of the star for part of the number and two groups of four men for other sections. All twelve end up horizontal at the conclusion, although analytical viewing reveals that the two groups of three men seen performing an elaborate kick and drop to the floor in the penultimate shot are augmented to four to each side on the cut to the next shot. Perhaps there was insufficient room on the set for four men to enter with the desired especially space-filling dance combination. The shot-by-shot creation of dance numbers is evident in such details, which come into view when practical questions, such as the number of dancers onscreen, are asked in a systematic fashion across a corpus of musical films.

The visible addition and subtraction of dancers to generate variety and build balanced and screen-filling arrangements proves important in widescreen numbers. The white male trio singing "Hallelujah" at the start of *Hit the Deck* is briefly joined by a black quartet of stewards (the Jubilaires), who add harmony to the vocal arrangement and offer a balanced visual counterpoint to the main threesome. The finale of the film, using the same song, builds through an additive logic that climaxes with Miller doing a tap solo backed up by forty sailors—among the largest countable widescreen throngs. "Swimmin' with Wimmin" (*Deep in My Heart*) assembles the full company of the number in a single shot by adding female dancers to the leading male duo with a combination of pans, set pieces, and lateral motion. "Mandy" does the same with a sustained tracking motion backward, efficiently going from one dancer to twenty-five in fifteen seconds. A subsequent shot in "Mandy" transitions smoothly from two to six to five dancers: Vera-Ellen begins a partner dance with Brescia, who wears a light green suit; four men in dark green—two on each side—slide in to frame the couple; then, one of the dark green dancers exits and Vera-Ellen and Brescia reposition themselves in the spaces between the remaining three backups for a "full house" configuration. The entire "Mandy" dance speaks to choreographer Robert Alton's sensitivity to filling the frame with a variety of arrangements of full figure dancing bodies.

Perhaps the most brilliant use of camera movement to add or subtract framing bodies around a star can be found in director George Cukor's single-shot treatment of Judy Garland singing "The Man That Got Away" in *A Star Is Born.* The number begins with Garland waving in a trombone player, who steps into the frame at screen left to play the song's introduction. The motif of instruments and their players appearing along the verticals is set. The trombone withdraws and Garland, positioned screen right, begins to sing. The first camera move pans right and pulls back, leaving Garland center with the drummer to screen right and the pianist, visible for most of the number as a background anchor, to screen left. The framing here is dynamic, staged to exploit both lighting and the depth axis. On the next move, Garland steps forward and the camera tracks back: when both stop, Garland is framed by a visible clarinet and upright bass—the players of each are not fully seen. A second layer of musicians in shadow—the drummer and trumpeter—add a further frame around the star. Garland points to the clarinet when the instrument has a solo, suggesting the extent to which the musical arrangement for the number (done well in advance of shooting and pre-recorded for lip-syncing) shaped the staging of the number for the camera (Figure 4.10a). The next section juxtaposes Garland, at the pianist's side, with a bank of brass players who rise briefly to punctuate a phrase. She waves them down: again, the staging tightly linked to the arrangement. Garland's largest move forward—so rapid that she briefly goes out of focus—is prepared by the camera tracking backward to frame her between drummer and brass, both in deep silhouette, which equalizes their roles as framing structures despite their different positions along the depth axis. At this point, nearing the climax of the song, the camera tracks back to its furthest point to finally reveal the substantial size of the band. Garland remains center, now surrounded by dark figures holding gleaming instruments (Figure 4.10b). Two non-playing individuals sit to screen right—a man, moving to the music; a woman, sitting stock still: these figures simply take up space and are among the many internal framing structures found in widescreen numbers.

Another number from another 1954 release warrants similarly sustained analysis for its shifting deployment of varied numbers of performers by way of several widescreen strategies discussed above. Michael Kidd's barn raising dance for eighteen dancers in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* expands and explores the rule of three and rings changes on the number and activity level of bodies in widescreen dance numbers. The eighteen dancers in the number fall into three equal-sized groups: six Pontipee brothers, six brides (to be, at this point), and six (eventually failed) suitors. Costumes—bright colored shirts for the Pontipees, neutral pants and jackets for the suitors—distinguish the male groups so that confrontation or cooperation among subsets is instantly evident (to the viewer, at least: Frank Pontipee briefly mistakes a brother for a suitor). A general rule obtains across the routine: the more individuals dancing, the more contained the choreography. Two or three couples dancing at once, for example, execute larger lifts and travel farther than six couples dancing at once. Displays of physical prowess by individual men—flips mostly, often onto or off of various apparatus-like elements—are done singly and watched by all. Two-man challenges, done on elevated planks, are framed so that the losers can fall out of the picture by dropping below the bottom of the frame. Kidd establishes a plot-related motif of virtuoso "stealing" of the brides by having suitors or Pontipees come swooping in on their unsuspecting rivals with fast, quintessentially widescreen moves: dropping down from a rooftop (crossing the upper horizontal), sliding in under a plank (designed as a long horizontal with room for movement underneath—as with the long table in "Stereophonic Sound"), or leapfrogging over their rivals' backs. Each of these moments involves nine dancers: three threesomes made of one woman and two men. The mathematics of the barn raising dance, with a few exceptions, is built on threes.

## Multitudes (video essay 10)

Beyond the countable, often symmetrically arrayed dancers in so many numbers, a group of widescreen routines present the viewer with uncountable and asymmetrical multitudes of dancing or singing bodies. Among the largest of these is "Totem Tom Tom" (*Rose Marie*). This exoticized tribal dance, staged by Busby Berkeley but with none of his recognizable staging tropes from the Academy era, may have been the first widescreen dance number committed to film. Staged on a huge set of rocky cliffs, the female dance lead runs swiftly across the landscape and, at one point, is thrown off a cliff top and caught far below. The effort to overwhelm with sheer scale is evident.

In a more conventional space, two major sequences in *There's No Business Like Show Business* ("Alexander's Ragtime Band" and the film's finale) pull way, way back to fill the screen with performing bodies, many in furious and independent motion. Suspended above the teeming crowd are the five leading characters—in the finale plus Marilyn Monroe—on a platform (a designated area) that rises to keep them center screen. Locating both these numbers in the Hippodrome Theatre in New York City (which seated 5,200 and was demolished in 1939 but surely remained in the memory of many mid-1950s audiences) draws a connection between the scale of CinemaScope and earlier, truly massive theatrical venues.

Also recalling theatrical tropes of multitudes are the several tavern scenes in widescreen operettas that revisited 1920s Broadway properties known for choral singing. In numbers like "Come Boys" (*The Student Prince*) and "Viva la You, Viva la Me" (*The Vagabond King*), carousing multitudes surround and swarm a singer who sometimes elevates themselves above the crowd by stepping on to a bench or table. Levels, important across the corpus, prove an easy way to fill the wide screen with bodies and faces. When experienced in a movie palace with a colossal, sometimes curved screen—the context for which these films were designed—it becomes a challenge to know where to look, and taking in the whole might involve selecting only part of the screen as one's focus. A final strategy involves numbers that exploit widescreen's capacity to contain multiple narratives.

## Split Focus (video essay 11)

A select group of widescreen numbers open the way toward what might be called theatrical spectatorship—where so much is going on that the moviegoer, like a theatregoer with the freedom to look anywhere, can choose among several points of focus. Widescreen musical number makers selectively exploited the new expanded space to put multiple stories onscreen simultaneously, resulting in expressively complex or divided-attention routines difficult to imagine being made in Academy. For instance, "Choreography" includes two contrasting performance styles: severe modern dance and swing tap. Represented by separate groups of performers, the two modes of expression go on simultaneously: it's not a duel so much as a juxtaposition facilitated by the increased space of widescreen. Similarly, the threesome number "Lazy" (*There's No Business Like Show Business*) combines a male-female pair (Gaynor and O'Connor) doing bold and big choreography and spoken commentary with the languorous, sexy posing and singing of Monroe. A divan (designated dance area) serves alternately to launch O'Connor into the air or as a place where one, two, or all three can go horizontal.

"Too Bad" (*Silk Stockings*) illustrates how widescreen allows for long shots that are filled with movement and expressive content. The number includes seven performers—three Russian Communists on a spree, three women brought in for their delight, and Astaire as ringleader of the party. For the vocal, the two trios crowd around one side of a large table while Astaire stands across from them in poses familiar from operetta tavern numbers. For the dance, the camera pulls back to place the round table at screen left and open a space to screen right, where Astaire cha-chas in turn with each woman. The women waiting their turn with Astaire pose against the table. The three Russians dance singly or with the women Astaire releases, their movements reflected in a mirror to screen right that adds dimension (and visible bodies) to the whole. Astaire had danced with three partners in turn before in "Steppin' Out with My Baby" (*Easter Parade*, 1948). There, however, his dance with each woman was taken in a separate shot: three partners, three shots. In widescreen, Astaire dances with each in one shot, creating a triple-partner routine in full figure done in a rich and active context. With so much going on, including Peter Lorre's knife-biting kicks at the table screen center, the viewer is left to look where they wish.

A split-focus approach recurring in the corpus involves the conceit of an ongoing disturbance that fails to stop a diegetic musical number: the viewer is invited to feel the tension between watching the number and attending to character-related developments.[8] In *Hit the Deck*, Tamblyn, a real sailor, steps in to a rehearsal of the stage number "What's a Little Kiss or Two?" featuring Debbie Reynolds and three male dancers in sailor suits. Despite his altering the mathematics of the group (ironically serving to balance the ensemble around the star), Reynolds and company proceed as if Tamblyn belongs—which, of course, he both does not (his character is not a performer) and does (his disruption is part of Pan's choreography). While the dancers regularly fall to the floor—there's a lot of going horizontal—Tamblyn remains fixed on stealing kisses from Reynolds. In effect, the routine spins two simultaneous stories: one internal to the routine, one central to the film's plot (the number marks Tamblyn and Reynolds's "meet cute" moment).

Several other strategies for the making of musical numbers in widescreen recur across the corpus—among them exploration of widescreen's relatively constrained depth axis. The strategies detailed here relate to aesthetic issues surrounding the performing body and share an extreme aesthetic defined variously as new points of entrance (across the horizontals); new postures (going horizontal), especially active dancing bodies; and increased numbers of performers. This extreme aesthetic is best understood as a collective response to the challenges and opportunities of a technological change that was abruptly forced upon the makers of the studio musical film. The decline and closure of the studio production units in the mid- and late 1950s happened to coincide with the aesthetic response of the units to widescreen: on the one hand, collapse of an industrial model; on the other, creative responses to a new format. The two developments are not necessarily related. And so, the extremes of the widescreen corpus detailed here should not be understood as any sort of "late" or decadent style so much as an aesthetic response to changing technological conditions that had only so many years to bloom and grow.

## Notes

1. See Todd Decker, *Astaire by Numbers: Time & the Straight White Male Dancer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), especially parts two and four.
2. See John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), for a general history of the conversion to widescreen.
3. See Ronald Haver, *A Star Is Born: The Making of the 1954 Movie and Its 1983 Restoration* (New York: Applause Books, 1988).
4. Production and premiere dates taken from the American Film Institute Catalog of Feature Films (aficatalog.afi.com).
5. In 1956, MGM also released *Meet Me in Las Vegas* (shot in 1955) and *Invitation to the Dance* (shot in Academy in 1952 and 1953).
6. *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* was shot in both CinemaScope and 1.85.
7. Two exceptions: the comic cruelty of "I'm Putting All My Eggs in One Basket" (*Follow the Fleet*, 1936) and the dance on a subway platform with the blonde Charisse in "Girl Hunt Ballet" (*The Band Wagon*, 1953).
8. Further examples include "Gotta Have Me Go with You" (*A Star Is Born*), "A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody" (*There's No Business Like Show Business*), and "Loo Loo" (*Hit the Deck*).

# PART II

# THE MUSICAL'S OTHERING IMPULSE

## CHAPTER 5

# FROM SNOW WHITE TO THE SNOW QUEEN

## *Voicing the Disney Princess*

COLLEEN MONTGOMERY

## Introduction

The Disney Princess film is among Walt Disney Animation Studios' most iconic, popular, and profitable media properties. While the studio's production of princess films has fluctuated since the late 1930s, the animated singing princess has become largely synonymous with the Disney brand. Princess films have also been critical to the studio's corporate success: *Snow White* (David Hand, 1937) launched Disney's successful transition into feature filmmaking in the late 1930s; *Cinderella* (Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske, 1950) marked its post–World War II return to animated feature film production after an eight-year hiatus; and a slate of princess films from *The Little Mermaid* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1989) to *Mulan* (Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, 1998) fueled the company's box-office resurgence during the Disney Renaissance. More recently, following a period of decline in the post-Disney Renaissance years of the early-to-mid-2000s, films such as *Tangled* (Nathan Greno and Byron Howard, 2010), *Brave* (Marc Andrews and Brenda Chapman, 2012), *Frozen* (Jennifer Lee and Chris Buck, 2013), and *Moana* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2016) have helped reverse the animation studio's commercial and critical fortunes once more—prompting critics to dub the late 2000s–2010s the "Disney Revival" era. Since its establishment in 2001, the Disney Princess franchise—a synergistic media and consumer products line that includes everything from music, books, and toys to clothing, cosmetics, and home décor—has become a multibillion-dollar operation.[1]

As texts centered on and historically marketed to young girls, Disney Princess films also figure heavily in popular and academic debates over the representation of women, gender, and femininity in Disney animation.[2] In particular, several studies have mapped the evolution of the princess trope across what are broadly considered the three cycles of Disney Princess film: the "Classical Princess" films of the 1930s–1950s, the "Renaissance Princess" films of the late 1980s–1990s, and the "post-Renaissance" or "Revival Princess" films of the late 2000s onward.[3] Broadly speaking, across the three cycles, scholars have traced the progression of the Disney Princess character from passive, domestic princess whose narrative trajectory is largely circumscribed to a heteronormative romance plot (in the Classical era), to what some view as protofeminist, agential princess who defies heteropatriarchal norms (in the Revival era). Indeed, much of the scholarly and popular discourse surrounding this chapter's culminating case studies, *Brave* and *Frozen* (which are, notably, the first Pixar and first Disney features, respectively, directed by women), positions the films as correctives to the problematic, much-critiqued gender politics of earlier Disney Princess films.

Yet, while these studies usefully unpack the gendered ideologies and representational practices that define/distinguish each cycle of the Princess film, much of this extant work focuses most closely on the visual design and narrative trajectory of the princess figure. By contrast, relatively little work attends to the critical role the voice plays within the gendered representational economies of the Disney Princess film. This is a particularly significant critical lacuna, as female vocal performance—articulated as speech and/or song—is not only a central mechanism for narrative and character development in the Disney Princess films but also a critical component of the films' attendant promotional campaigns, and media paratexts (from sing-along videos to soundtrack albums). To extend and deepen extant understandings of these gendered dynamics, this chapter begins by tracing the history of female vocality in Disney Princess films of the 1930s to the late 2000s. The study then turns to a close analysis of the relationship between the voice, identity, agency, and female (inter)subjectivity in two recent iterations of the Disney Princess film: *Brave* and *Frozen*.[4]

In so doing, this chapter takes its cue primarily from Jennifer Fleeger's foundational work on vocal performance in the Disney Princess film, as well as Robynn Stilwell's examination of female vocality in *Brave* and *Frozen* as girls' coming-of-age films. Fleeger aligns each cycle of the Disney Princess film with both a distinct vocal performance style and a particular mode of production, namely: the "operatic princess" and hand-drawn animation for the Classical era films; "the Broadway voice," and "computer-painted animation" (or hand-drawn animation that is digitally inked and painted) for the Disney Renaissance films through to *The Princess and the Frog* (John Musker and Ron Clements, 2009); and the "pop voice" and 3D computer animation for the Disney Revival films, *Tangled* and *Frozen*, and Pixar's *Brave*.[5] Articulating the princess's vocal performance style to both the character's moment and mode of production, Fleeger argues that we can best understand the Disney Princess voice "in relation to the technologies used to produce the princess's image and to the environments in which these films and their related products are circulated."[6] Crucially, Fleeger argues that in each of these periods, "Disney relied on the female voice to validate new animated musical forms" and animation technologies.[7] In short, the operatic voice of the Classical era films helped legitimize the nascent animated feature film musical as art, the Renaissance era films' "computer-aided effects were justified as essential to a good 'show' by the Broadway voice," and the familiar celebrity voices of the 3D, computer-animated Revival films "restore[d] an element of fantasy to an animated form that might threaten to be too much like real life."[8] Thus, as she asserts, while the voices characteristic of each cycle "belong to particular styles of performance, they nevertheless serve as a shorthand for authenticity."[9] Extending Fleeger's analysis, this chapter argues that the contemporary construction of the Princess's voice equally serves the broader ideological function of, at least ostensibly, revising gendered codes and conventions by giving voice to female (inter)subjectivity in a way that departs from the established tropes of earlier Disney Princess films.

Whereas Fleeger locates *Brave* and *Frozen* vis-à-vis the post-Renaissance period and its attendant digital modes of production, Stilwell situates *Brave* and *Frozen* within a broader cycle of girls' coming-of-age films of the early 1990s to the 2010s. As Stilwell demonstrates, these films foreground the centrality of the voice to girls' identity formation, particularly during the transition into adulthood. Stilwell aptly notes that the protagonist's narrative arc in these girls' coming-of age-films parallels a trajectory that Carol Gilligan traces in her 1982 landmark study of girls' development, *In a Different Voice*. As Stilwell relays, Gilligan's study "found that the voice is pivotal as both an agent and symbol of maturation in girls. Even assertive and independent prepubescent girls will often 'lose their voices' in their tween/teen years." Girls will become quieter and more withdrawn as they simultaneously "become more aware of the cultural norms and expectations about 'femininity': be looked at, but don't take up space in a conversation, or even physically."[10] As they negotiate these cultural codes and constraints, girls will move from "assertiveness to silence (often externally imposed and sometimes manifested even in imprisonment) to the finding of their own voices."[11] Building on Stilwell's astute observations, this chapter considers how the Disney Princess film has historically articulated this dynamic of "losing" and "finding" the voice both literally and metaphorically as a symbol of agency and identity. While this narrative trope is most explicitly manifest in *The Little Mermaid*, as the following section demonstrates, many other Disney Princesses follow a similar trajectory. Finally, drawing on Leslie Dunn and Nancy Jones's feminist work on vocal embodiment, this chapter conceives of the voice in the Disney Princess film not only as a vehicle for speech and song but also as "a metaphor for textual authority" and, by extension, for "cultural agency, political enfranchisement, sexual autonomy, and expressive freedom."[12]

## It's She Who Holds Her Tongue Who Gets a Man: Female Vocality in the Classical and Renaissance Princess Films

Though Stilwell does not address the Classical Disney Princess film, as she notes, "Disney musical films have often centered on the coming of age experiences of adolescent girls."[13]

The narrative arcs of *Snow White*'s and *Sleeping Beauty*'s protagonists, in particular, seem to exemplify Gilligan's trajectory. Indeed, these princesses not only lose their voices as they come of age but lose consciousness entirely and fall into a magic-induced coma. Their seemingly lifeless and manifestly voiceless bodies are then enshrined (in a glass coffin and castle, respectively) and subject to the gaze of mourning onlookers. While Cinderella maintains consciousness, she too is figuratively and literally silenced by her wicked stepmother (who issues commands such as "Silence!" and "Hold your tongue!"). The princesses subsequently regain their voices, but this restitution is contingent upon both the intervention of a prince and subsequent formation of a heterosexual coupling and the silencing of a "bad mother" figure (manifested as death for *Snow White*'s and *Sleeping Beauty*'s wicked women, and in the final shot of Lady Tremaine, mouth agape in silent disbelief, in *Cinderella*).[14]

Reading the films from a psychoanalytic perspective, it is equally worth noting that the Classical Princesses are, to use Kaja Silverman's term, "doubly diegetized," "overheard not only by the cinema audience, but by a fictional eavesdropper or group of eavesdroppers" who, unlike the princess, are aligned with the cinematic apparatus through this "transcendental auditory position" they occupy.[15] Snow White's and Sleeping Beauty's fictional eavesdroppers, for example, are the princes who woo them.[16] These eavesdropping scenes notably coincide with the princess's performance of her "I want song" ("I'm Wishing" for Snow White, and "Once Upon a Dream" for Sleeping Beauty)—a number that gives voice to the character's desires, and that "by definition rests on a privileged form of subjectivity, one not always seen as entangled with the desires of parents and community members."[17] It is thus particularly significant that the prince not only eavesdrops on this privileged articulation of her subjectivity, but interjects his own voice into her song, thereby silencing hers.[18]

Thus, although the Classical princesses express their desires through song, their voices are, perhaps above all, objects of aesthetic fascination: for princes, forest creatures, and even the princesses themselves. Snow White and Cinderella, for example, admire their vocal reflections in a type of auto-affective acoustic mirroring. Snow White peers into and sings in call-and-response with the echo of a voice that rises from a wishing well, while Cinderella harmonizes with herself as her voice and image fills soap bubbles that float through the air. Ultimately, the princesses' singing talent, and the grain of their (operatic) voices, function as an aural analogue for their beauty and mark them as privileged within the narrative.

The late 1950s to late 1980s represent the longest hiatus in Disney's production of princess films and, as noted above, a steady decline in Disney Animation's box-office returns in the latter two decades of the period. *The Little Mermaid*, which launched the second cycle of princess films and the Disney Renaissance in 1989, recapitulates many of the vocal tropes of the Classical Princess film. The teenage princess, Ariel, literally loses her voice in her quest to become human and be with her prince, and her disembodied voice becomes a fetishized object of desire. Ariel's silencing is also explicitly gendered. The sea witch, Ursula, to whom Ariel cedes her voice, persuades her to strike such a bargain by laying out the apparent norms of human femininity, telling Ariel that her voice is but a “trifle,” “a token”—pointing back to the objectification of her voice—of little value compared to her “looks,” “pretty face,” and “body language.” She equally frames women’s speech in gendered terms, dismissing it as “blabber,” “gossip,” and “idle prattle.” She goes on to assert, “it’s she who holds her tongue who gets a man.”

Yet the semantic content of Ursula’s song—indeed, the very fact she sings—sets Ursula apart from female villains in the first cycle of princess films. More important, the vocalizations of Pat Carroll, who deliberately deepened her contralto voice for her performance of Ursula, in tandem with the campy onscreen performance of the animated character (who was notably modeled on drag queen Divine), lends itself to a queer reading of the song as a commentary on the performance of gender and thus pushes back against the heteropatriarchal norms the film ultimately reinforces.[19] Ariel’s “I want” song, “Part of Your World,” equally evidences this tension. The mermaid expresses desperate longing (“What would I give if I could live out of these waters?”) and a form of linguistic incapacity manifested in her inability to name things in the human world (“What do ya call ’em? Oh yeah, feet”) but also a desire for upward mobility, both figurative and literal (“Bright young women, sick of swimmin’, ready to stand”) and freedom (“Wandering free, wish I could be, part of that world”). This tension at the heart of *The Little Mermaid*’s vocal performances is characteristic of the Renaissance cycle of Disney Princess films that, as Alexandra Heatwole notes, “revolved around rebellion, self-knowledge, and choice,” as well as a desire to break from the restrictive confines of their social milieus.[20] Belle, for example, opines, “There must be more than this provincial life.” Jasmine, after discovering a “whole new world” beyond the restrictive world of the palace, sings, “I’ve come so far. I can’t go back to where I used to be.” Mulan laments, “When will my reflection show who I am inside?”

That the years separating the first two Disney Princess cycles coincided with second-wave feminism, and that the second cycle unfolded in tandem with the rise of third-wave feminism is crucial to understanding the shifts in the textual construction of the female voice during this period. As Heatwole notes, these princesses’ narrative trajectories “seemingly reflect or respond to a different political climate. In an age of Riot Grrl, emerging ‘third-wave’ feminism, and on the verge of ‘Girl Power’ . . . the girl was now a point of convergence for conflicting debates about risk and empowerment.”[21] This is not to say that these broader cultural discourses simply filtered into the texts but that Disney expressly revised the Classical Princess model in the Renaissance period in order to cater their products to shifting audience tastes, and to remain competitive in the market. Neither do I mean to suggest that the Renaissance films are feminist or liberatory. Ultimately, while these princesses sing of breaking free from oppression, their desires are articulated, and remain circumscribed to, forming a heteropatriarchal couple—the realization of which quells their rebellion and firmly inscribes them in the dominant patriarchal order. The films of the Revival Princess cycle evince an awareness of such criticisms, and, with them, we begin to see a move away from the romantic musical comedy as a narrative template and narrative resolutions that hinge on the formation of the heterosexual couple. While very much in dialogue with the codes and conventions that have historically subtended the Disney Princess film, the Revival

Princess cycle revises existing tropes, incorporates new narrative templates, and finds resolution in female intersubjectivity.

## Female Vocality and the Revival Princess

The late 1990s to late 2000s represent the second hiatus in the production of new Disney Princess films, though during this period the company nonetheless expanded its exploitation of existing Disney Princess properties via its newly established Princess merchandise line. When the Princess film returned to the studio's production slate, several important developments within Disney Animation had taken place that would shape the new iterations of the Disney Princess.

Perhaps most significant, the late 1990s to early 2000s also marked the rise of Pixar Animation Studios. Pixar not only released a string of critical and box-office successes during these interstitial years but cultivated a "family-friendly" brand identity—free from many of the negative associations that increasingly circled Disney.[22] In so doing, Pixar in a sense usurped Disney's long-standing role as the primary purveyor of animated family-friendly fare. Yet, it was ultimately Pixar executive John Lasseter who would relaunch the princess film following the Walt Disney Company's acquisition of its onetime protégé, and installment of Pixar's corporate leadership at the helm of Disney Animation Studios. With *The Princess and the Frog* (2008), Disney returned to the princess subgenre, to 2D animation (which it had mostly phased out by that point), and brought back Renaissance directors Ron Clements and John Musker, who had left the studio in 2005. As these moves suggest, the film largely replicates the codes and conventions of the Renaissance Princess film. The film's heroine, Tiana, is ambitious, and her primary desire—which she voices in her "I want" song "Almost There"—is to start a business; however, she ultimately accomplishes this goal by finding her prince. *The Princess and the Frog* was a moderate box-office success and received relatively strong reviews, yet it fell below the studio's expectations (and thus essentially sounded the death knell of its hand-drawn animation operations). In light of the film's less-than-desired performance, Disney quickly retitled the (CGI) princess film it had already put into production—rebranding "Rapunzel" as *Tangled* in an attempt to dissociate the film's image from both Disney's fairy tale and princess tradition. This marketing tactic is pointedly made manifest in the trailers for *Tangled*, which are both narrated by, and align the viewer with, the subject position of the film's male lead, Flynn Rider—who has a much more minor role in the narrative than these trailers suggest.

By burying the lede, so to speak, in an effort to increase the film's demographic appeal, these marketing paratexts silenced the film's princess. Rapunzel speaks but a few words of dialogue and always *to* Flynn—in fact, her most common utterance in these trailers *is* "Flynn." Rapunzel is given more voice in the narrative (via pop singer Mandy

Moore), however; and in much the same way that her voice is welded to Flynn in *Tangled*'s trailers, so too is her narrative trajectory in the film text. The strategy of burying, or silencing, the princess in the feature's marketing paratexts elicited anger from some viewers (who were dismayed to discover that the film was not, in fact, an action-adventure film with a male lead but a princess film); however, *Tangled* was a box-office success.

Ultimately, while female vocality in the Disney Princess film evolved over the course of the first two cycles—in terms of performance style and the extent to which the princess expresses her desires—her "voice" as a symbol of her agency is limited, and her aspirations are contained within a heteronormative romance plot. This remained the case in the first entrants in Disney's new princess cycle. As Fleeger puts it, summarizing all three cycles, "the relative lack of variance in [the princess] songs tells us something important—while animation styles have changed, the aspirations of girlhood have not been radically altered."[23] With 2013's *Frozen*, however, Fleeger perceives a subversion of the traditional musical structure and narrative function of the Princess's "I want" song. For this analysis, *Frozen* is a significant entry in the Revival cycle in its foregrounding female inter-subjectivity and subverting the containment of female desire within the heteropatriarchal romance, thereby mobilizing the voice toward the expression of more oppositional desires.

## "That Perfect Girl Is Gone": *Frozen*

In a 2014 *New Yorker* article, psychology professors George Bizer and Erika Wells describe their bewilderment at a "powerful force at work" on their college campus: *Frozen* fandom. *Frozen*'s phenomenal appeal is readily quantifiable. The film earned over $1.2 billion in global box-office revenue, making it the highest-grossing animated feature to date at the time of its release. Its soundtrack album, the highest grossing of 2013, spent thirteen nonconsecutive weeks atop the Billboard charts.[24] And *Frozen* merchandise has netted Disney billions in additional profits.[25] The psychologists knew well how popular the film had become—their own children had been swept up in the *Frozen* craze. What they could not comprehend was why the film seemed to appeal to college-age students—even those who were not, in their assessment, "typical Disney-loving fans." The psychologists organized a screening of the film and solicited audience reactions. While the participants (split evenly by gender) offered a variety of responses to the film, "one theme seemed to resonate: everyone could identify with Elsa.[26] She wasn't your typical princess. She wasn't your typical Disney character."[27]

The performers who voiced the princesses framed their characters in much the same way. Kristen Bell (the voice of Anna), for example, relayed in one interview: "I've always been keen to be part of a Disney movie but I wanted to play the anti-princess. . . . No one wants to see those traditional princess stories these days, where the girls are always striving to be perfect. It's not interesting anymore."[28] Numerous reviews and articles accompanying *Frozen*'s release echoed this sentiment, positioning the film's royal sisters (particularly Elsa) as distinct from the "typical" or "average" Disney Princess.[29] Indeed, many went so far as to champion (or, in the right-wing media sphere, denounce) the film as "feminist" and "queer."[30] Others, however, challenged this claim, calling the film's ostensible feminism "false" or "flaky."[31]

Most significantly, arguments for and against reading the film as a feminist and/or queer text offered *Frozen*'s female vocal performances as evidence of the film's progressive or regressive politics. These opposing views are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Rather, they speak to the ways in which *Frozen*—particularly its construction of female vocality—both deviates from and replicates the textual models established in the first two cycles of the Disney Princess film. We can best understand these tensions in the text, and the discourses surrounding it, in relation to the history of the Disney Princess film as well as the industrial and cultural contexts of *Frozen*'s production and reception.

Continuing in the Disney fairy tale tradition, *Frozen* is very loosely based on Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen." The film centers on the story of two orphaned sisters, Anna and Elsa. Elsa, elder sister and heir to the throne, is born with the power to conjure ice with a wave of her hand—an ability that isolates her from both her sister and her home when she unwittingly transforms her land into an icy winterscape and exiles herself to the tundral hinterlands. To save her sister and her kingdom, Anna (seemingly the film's protagonist, though Elsa has emerged as by far the more popular character among fans) embarks on a mission to find and return Elsa to their home kingdom of Arendelle but ultimately ends up gravely wounded at her sister's icy touch.

From a generic standpoint, *Frozen* follows in the long tradition of Disney animated musicals with integrated song performances woven throughout the film to advance plot and character development. But while the narrative resolution of the Classical/Renaissance Princess film is founded on wedding (figuratively or literally) the princess to a prince, *Frozen*'s denouement revolves around sisterly, as opposed to heterosexual, love. In this respect, the film subverts, at least to a certain extent, the much-critiqued patriarchal and heteronormative impulses upon which so many Disney "happily ever afters" are predicated. Much like the Renaissance Princess films, there is a tension at the heart of *Frozen*—reflected in the polarized discourses surrounding the film. As critics have noted, although the film privileges sisterly love, Anna's storyline, like those of the Renaissance Princesses, culminates in the formation of a heterosexual couple (if not a wedded one). The film has nonetheless been read, in equal measure, as a triumph of Disney's (apparent) burgeoning feminism. We can perhaps best understand these contradictions by examining the Princesses' respective song vehicles: Anna's "Love Is an Open Door" and Elsa's "Let It Go." The songs are distinct in tone, as well as in the way they position their characters within the narrative and, crucially, in terms of the potential they offer for articulating female interiority and female subjectivity.[32]

Anna's song (and her narrative trajectory, writ large) hews more closely to the model of the Disney Renaissance Princess. As we learn early in the film, Anna's narrative goal is to find her prince and "live happily ever after." "Love Is an Open Door," a love song performed by Anna and her (ostensible) prince, Hans, gives voice to these desires. Yet while "Love Is an Open Door" adopts a playful, tongue-in-cheek tone, and reads as a romantic duet, the film's ending retroactively inscribes a far different meaning on the song and Anna's vocal performance. The song is structured as a call-and-response, with Anna and Hans moving between witty repartee and jubilant expressions of their love (at first sight) for one another. Throughout the song, the duo sings of, and articulates, their apparent "mental synchronization." They spontaneously pronounce phrases in unison (e.g., exclaiming, "Jinx! Jinx again!"), and often pick up and complete phrases the other initiates. Epitomizing the song's cheeky (yet simultaneously cloying) tone, during a spoken interlude in the song, Hans intones, "we finish each other's . . ." to which Anna replies, "sandwiches!" Yet, though playful on its face, in the film's third act, Hans—who up to this point has been the archetypal prince—is unmasked as an utterly fiendish villain.

Having been inadvertently wounded by her sister, Anna—facing certain death without "true love's kiss"—looks to prince Hans to save her life. Hans flatly rebukes and derides her, sarcastically lamenting: "Oh, Anna. If only there was someone out there who loved you." The audience thus discovers that Hans's love was a ruse—a means of usurping the throne. Hans goes on to note how easy it was to fool Anna: "You were so desperate for love. You were willing to marry me, just like that." In retrospect, the audience thus discovers that "Love Is an Open Door" is not, in fact, a typical Disney Princess love duet. Rather the song's call-and-response structure was a calculated tactic for calling forth and controlling Anna's voice.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, we might usefully understand the song as a type of acoustic mirror. In Silverman's theoretical construct of the acoustic mirror (which she applies to the female voice in cinema), it is via the mother's voice that the child learns to speak, "imitating the sounds made by the mother, fashioning its voice after hers." Following the subject's entry into language, however, the mother's voice comes to symbolize "the repudiated elements of his infantile babble," as noise or nonsense.[33] While Hans initially seems to derive a sense of plenitude by speaking and singing in harmony with Anna (giving the audience no indication that his sentiments are inauthentic), he ultimately repudiates Anna's voice as "infantile babble." Indeed, he frames her belief in love at first sight as an infantile fantasy. That Anna frequently refers to herself as "crazy" throughout "Love Is an Open Door" only seems to shore up this reading. Although Anna eventually finds a "good" mate in Kristoff, he too rejects her belief in love at first sight as juvenile nonsense and ultimately is proven right when Hans's true motivations are revealed. That Kristen Bell, an actress with operatic training, voices Anna also frames her song—and her inability to articulate her desires—in relation to the restricted subject position of the Classical Princesses.

Unlike Anna's song, and the Classical/Renaissance princess songs of "longing for belonging," "Let It Go" is a radical "rejection rather than the projection of a fantasy."[34] Delivered in a self-assured tone, using declarative rhetoric, Elsa's number is not an "I want" song, but an "I won't" song. Elsa's performance of the song occurs at the point in the narrative where she has fled her homeland and retreated into the mountains. The song (performed by Broadway star Idina Menzel) gives voice to Elsa's rejection of her prescribed position within her kingdom, the patriarchal restrictions (physical and symbolic) imposed upon her, and by extension, the patriarchal norms of femininity. Indeed, the film has simultaneously been read as a coming-out song, a feminist anthem, and a vehicle for expressing a variety of marginalized identities.

At just over four minutes in length, "Let It Go" is notably longer than the average Disney Princess "I want" vehicle, which allows the song to develop as Elsa constructs her ice fortress. Though Elsa's gestures appear to conjure her castle, her voice plays an equally crucial role in calling it forth from the mountain. Indeed, following Dolar, her "voice seems to possess the power to turn words into acts; the mere vocalization endows words with a ritual efficacy, the passage from articulation to vocalization is like a *passage à l'acte*, a passage to action and an exertion of authority."[35] Each facet of the castle she constructs is articulated to an emphasized syllable in her song, and her words call into being the crystalline structures onscreen. As she sings, "My power flurries through the air into the ground," the foundation of her castle spreads out beneath her feet. As she belts out, "My soul is spiraling in frozen fractals all around," geometrical ice crystals spiral upward toward the top of the castle. Her voice appears intrinsically tied to her magic. In this way, Elsa is a doubly atypical Disney Princess. In Disney's formula, it is typically villains who are banished from the kingdom, not princesses. As Ryan Bunch notes, "Let It Go" is also "unusual in the Disney repertoire in its particular hybridization of existing tropes."[36] Indeed, Fleeger contends that the song combines elements of all three cycles of the Disney Princess film in that "*Frozen* is a computer animated film, Idina Menzel is a Tony Award–winning singer, and, most importantly, the song and the Snow Queen who sings it have an operatic legacy rooted in representations of madness and infirmity."[37]

This atypicality in fact points to Elsa's genesis: she was initially conceived as a villain; however, once the film's composers, Robert Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez, wrote the song, they felt Elsa could no longer be evil. The song would instead become the vehicle for her defiance: her rejection of the forces that suppressed her, articulation of her long-repressed desires, and assertion of her identity. In this respect, it is equally worth noting the striking thematic parallels between "Let It Go" and another song strongly associated with Menzel: "Defying Gravity" from Stephen Schwartz's Broadway musical *Wicked*—for which Menzel originated the role of the "wicked witch" Elphaba. Indeed, as Robynn Stilwell points out, *Frozen*'s narrative bears a strong resemblance to *Wicked*, a production that also gained great popularity among young women and girls.[38] Much like "Defying Gravity," "Let It Go," which closes with Elsa gazing into the camera, one eyebrow raised, has is emblematic of the protagonist's defiance. Yet, in spite of the widespread embrace of Elsa and "Let It Go" as liberatory, the film ultimately works to contain Elsa's oppositional desire. At the close of the film, she returns to her kingdom and assumes her "proper" role as queen. She no longer has to hide her magic powers, but she has essentially returned from her castle in the tundra to her "rightful" path.

## The Disney Pixar Princess: *Brave*

Unlike Anna and Elsa, who are not officially part of the Disney Princess merchandise line franchise, *Brave*'s Merida *is* an official Disney Princess, and yet this film is a notable outlier in the Princess film cycle.[39] *Brave* is the only Disney Princess film produced by Disney's subsidiary, Pixar, which had historically maintained a distinct brand identity, in part by eschewing not only Disney Animation's singing princess archetype but musicals and girl-centric narratives altogether. Indeed, when Brenda Chapman, the film's original director, first pitched the film to the studio in May 2004, the executive leadership was initially unenthused. As *Brave*'s production designer Steve Filcher relays, "Brenda was telling us about it, and my eyes glazed over. Princess, king, mother-daughter, ancient kingdom—all words I didn't like to think about."[40]

Not only would *Brave*, the studio's first fairy tale, feature Pixar's first female protagonist and be helmed by its first female director, but it would also engage directly with the Disney tradition it had long avoided—and against which it had long constructed its brand identity. Pixar's attempts at distinguishing Merida from the Disney Princess archetype are not only observable in her physical appearance (the more "realistic" proportions of her waist and bust, especially) and her narrative trajectory but also in the construction of her voice, in terms of both the textual discourse it bears, and its positioning within the space of the diegesis. While Merida does not, as Fleeger puts it, "sing for the camera," the princess nonetheless has a type of metadiegetic singing voice that externalizes her subjective interiority through song performances. *Brave* thus represents a different type of "singing princess," one imbued with a greater capacity to speak and sing from a position of textual authority.

Set in the tenth-century Scottish Highlands, *Brave* follows the story of a plucky teenage princess, Merida. Much like Elsa, Merida, a princess groomed to ascend the throne, struggles to reconcile her subjectivity and desires with the ideological constraints of being a "proper" princess and, by extension, "a proper female subject." The film's narrative conflict is set in motion by Merida's resistance to, and her mother's insistence on, her betrothal to the son of an allied clan leader. In an attempt to change her fate with a magic cake, Merida inadvertently transforms her mother into a bear and must then reverse the spell by repairing their strained relationship—visually symbolized by the mending of a tapestry the two wove together, and which Merida tore in anger.[41] Thus, like *Frozen*, the film's resolution hinges on the development and deepening of female intersubjective relationships—in this case between a mother and daughter. The film's thematic focus on a mother-daughter relationship, however, sets *Brave* apart from *Frozen* and the majority of Disney Princess films, in which mothers are absent, dead, or killed.[42] Moreover, unlike *Frozen*'s Anna, Merida has no comic companion or heterosexual love interest/romantic subplot. Most significantly, the voice plays a critical role in articulating both the dynamic of unity and division between mother and daughter on which the film hinges, as well as the film's rhetoric of "authenticity." The first section of this case study examines the ways in which the film is structured around the discord and fusion of Merida and Elinor's voices that arises from Merida's attempts to "find her voice"— in terms of both asserting her agency and voicing her subjective desires.

Two montage sequences early in the film help illustrate the dialectic of Merida's and Elinor's voices as well as the film's narrative thread of "finding one's voice." The first, which charts Merida's daily routine, is structured around the interplay of three voices: Merida's voice-over narration, which provides a commentary on the action; Merida's diegetic dialogue; and Elinor's diegetic dialogue. At the scene's outset, Merida describes her life to the audience in voice-over narration, stating: "I'm the princess. I'm the example. I've got duties, responsibilities, expectations. My whole life is planned out, until the day I become, well, my mother. She's in charge of every single day of my life." On one hand, her narration sets up the conflict with her mother that will unfold over the course of the film over her desire to break from the path "planned out" for her: a path toward marriage, queendom, and motherhood. At the same time, it is significant that her voice is not confined to an interior space within the diegesis, but floats above it and seems to call forth the onscreen action. That is, she speaks directly to the audience from a position of textual authority. We might thus also understand her narration as a meta-commentary on the expectations to which critics and audiences held the character as the first example of a Pixar princess and female protagonist.

As the sequence moves through Merida's quotidian activities, Elinor's voice interjects into her narration and sets forth the "duties, responsibilities, and expectations" to which Merida alludes. Elinor's voice operates here as a voice of authority, wielded to proscribe and police Merida's conduct, and *her* voice. Elinor commands Merida to "project!" and "enunciate!" and asserts: "A princess does not chortle! Doesn't stuff her gob! Rises early. Is compassionate. Patient. Cautious! And above all, a princess strives for . . . well, perfection!" Elinor's voice both conditions her daughter's actions/voice and lays out the princess model that Merida will subvert. The montage sequence that follows this scene prefaces this trajectory. Merida, like many of her princess forebears, chafes at the expectations of princesshood and femininity; however, she does not "lose" her voice. Rather, this second (musical) montage sequence externalizes Merida's inner monologue through song.

While Merida's voice-over narration and dialogue in the first sequence is voiced by Scottish actress Kelly Macdonald, Scottish-Gaelic folk singer Julie Fowlis provides Merida's meta-diegetic or subjective-internal singing voice in the following musical montage sequence. Fowlis's voice adds an extra-textual layer to the "finding your voice" narrative in that, as she has relayed in several interviews, prior to the film she sang almost exclusively in Scottish Gaelic and had to "find" her English singing voice for the film.[43] The song in this sequence functions as Merida's "I want" number; however, it departs from the longing tone of earlier princesses' iterations of the number. Instead, it is constructed around a series of assertive "I will . . ." statements ("I will ride," "I will fly"). Following Mary Ann Doane, we can usefully understand "Touch the Sky" as an interior monologue communicated through song that gives voice to Merida's (via Fowlis) interiority. As a surrogate subjective-internal voice, however, it simultaneously bears the "privileged mark of interiority" and "is necessarily presented as outside" the space of the diegesis, which "endows it with a certain authority."[44] Thus, while Merida is still firmly located within the patriarchal confines of her kingdom (and, arguably the psychic structures of the cinematic apparatus), the positioning of her voice in relation to the space of the diegesis opens a space for her to assert her agency and autonomy from within these structures.

A scene in the film's third act perhaps best illustrates Merida's agential use of her voice for political enfranchisement. The scene also demonstrates the key function the voice serves in establishing an intersubjective relationship between mother and daughter—the crux of the film's denouement. During the scene, Merida attempts to restore peace among the kingdom's clans who have become embroiled in a bitter dispute over her refusal to be betrothed to one of their sons, as her mother, now transformed into a giant bear, looks on across the room—visible to Merida, but concealed from the (bear-hunting) chiefs. After her first attempts to address the crowd go unheard, Merida silences their cacophonous bickering, exclaiming, "Shut it!" She then proceeds to recount the battle that brought them together as a unified kingdom, a tale that her mother passed on to her in her childhood through the tradition of oral storytelling. In the second half of the scene, mother and daughter's voices merge as Merida expresses her desires—speaking for and through Elinor.

On the verge of capitulating to the prospect of her proposal, Merida glimpses her mother across the room signaling her to stop with the wave of her paws. Elinor then communicates with her daughter through gesture as Merida simultaneously ventriloquizes and interprets for her:

> My mother, the queen, feels . . . uh, in her heart, that I . . . that we should be free to . . . write our own story. Follow our hearts, and find love in our time.

Through this exchange (which is met with tears and uproarious applause by the clan chiefs), mother and daughter both "find their voice," and Merida makes herself heard. Elinor, who has struggled to communicate with Merida in both her human and bear form, re-establishes an emotional connection with her daughter. Simultaneously, while Merida ventriloquizes Elinor's mimed speech she expresses her own desire to "write her own story" rather than chart the course her mother had "planned out." She even enacts political change as the clans decide to abandon their practice of prearranged marriage. This is not to say, however, that she completely dismantles the social structure of her kingdom.

We might most usefully read Merida's speech in relation to an earlier scene in the film, which equally centers on a vocal communion between mother and daughter whose voices join in song (the film's one diegetic song performance). In a flashback sequence, Elinor, seated on a rocking chair in the glowing light of the hearth, sings a Gaelic lullaby to a young Merida, who then joins her in song.

In addition to representing Elinor and Merida's emotional distance and subsequent rapprochement through Merida's ventriloquism, the film, which was the first to be exhibited in Dolby Atmos, also wove this thread into the sound mix. According to Gary Rydstrom, who worked on the film as sound designer and re-recording mixer, roughly 75 percent of the sound track was mixed in Dolby 7.1 and the remaining 25 percent in Atmos.[45] As Will Files, who oversaw the Dolby Atmos mix, relays, Atmos's ability to separate out individual sounds into "objects" that can then be placed in particular speakers was very specifically used in mixing the film's dialogue.[46] To sonically represent the emotional distance between Merida and her mother in the first half of the film, Files placed the characters' voices in objects that pointed them to speakers on opposite sides of the screen (even when their bodies were more proximate onscreen) to create a sense of physical distance between them. Similarly, when Elinor transforms into a bear, her "voice" (in the form of grunts and growls) was sent to an overhead speaker not only to represent the spatial disjoint between Merida and the towering bear but also to accentuate the emotional rift between them. When mother and daughter reconcile near the film's conclusion, though they are on opposite sides of the screen, their voices were joined together in the same speaker much as they are brought together in Merida's speech—an aural analogue for mending the torn tapestry.[47]

This is not to say that *Brave* is an unabashedly feminist film. Indeed, that Chapman, Pixar's first female director, was fired at a late stage in the production points back to Pixar's boys' club culture (which Chapman herself has critiqued).[48] Chapman was, however, granted directorial credit and would thus go on to become the first female director to win an Academy Award for Best Animated Picture when *Brave* took home the award. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that, while the film is a story of finding one's voice, Chapman's removal from the project in a sense silenced the film's female authorial voice as the production "came of age." That Chapman's relationship with her own daughter was the initial inspiration for the film makes this suppression of her authorial voice all the more significant. Neither Pixar nor Chapman has detailed the precise reasons she was let go from the project, citing only "creative differences." Chapman's contract with Pixar, in fact, precludes her from discussing the circumstances of her dismissal, redoubling her symbolic and literal silencing.[49]

## Conclusion

Whereas *The Princess and the Frog*'s disappointing box-office performance in 2009 prompted some critics to sound the death knell of the Disney Princess film, a decade on the success of Disney's most recent Princess films, *Moana* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2016) and *Frozen II* (Jennifer Lee and Chris Buck, 2019), suggests the subgenre is far from defunct. Most strikingly, *Moana* and *Frozen II* rehearse several of the key vocal and thematic tropes apparent in *Brave* and *Frozen.* Much like Merida, the eponymous teenager Moana is being groomed to assume chiefdom of her village, but balks at the path laid forth for her and instead sets out on a seafaring quest to save her island. Also in keeping with *Brave*, Moana has no romantic subplot or heterosexual coupling to structure its narrative resolution. Rather, it is "a voice inside" that sets *Moana*'s quest in motion. Moana's "I want" number, "How Far I'll Go," explicitly addresses her struggles to negotiate cultural norms and expectations as she comes of age. Of her struggles to accept the path laid out for her, Moana sings: "I know everybody on this island has a role on this island. So maybe I can roll with mine. I can lead with pride. I can make us strong. I'll be satisfied if I play along. But the *voice inside* sings a different song. What is wrong with me?" It is this subjective interior voice that propels *Moana* on her dual narrative journey of saving her island and finding her place within its social order. Indeed, while in the first iteration of her "I want" number, Moana sings of the ocean calling to her, in the reprise of the number at the film's conclusion, she arrives at the realization that "the call isn't out there at all, it's inside me." The song's writer, Lin-Manuel Miranda, highlights the significance of the voice in an interview about the song, noting, "I think the key insight that really made the song what it is: It's not about not liking where she is and wanting to go somewhere else. She loves where she is. She loves her parents. She *loves* her island. She loves her community. And there's this voice anyway."[50]

Much like *Brave*, *Moana*'s narrative resolution equally hinges on a type of vocal union between a metaphorical "mother" and daughter. At the film's climax, Moana subdues the lava demon Te Kā through song, restoring her to her natural form: the Gaia-like goddess Te Fiti, or so-called Mother Island. Similarly, a vocal communion between mother and daughter is an equally critical structuring component of Disney's most recent Princess film, *Frozen II*. Indeed, the narrative is set in motion by Elsa's pursuit of a mysterious voice, a "secret siren" that calls out to her—a voice that we ultimately discover belongs to her mother (voiced by Evan Rachel Wood). Elsa's and her mother's voice then unite in song in "Show Yourself," which centers Elsa's journey of self-discovery, of unearthing the origins of her powers by answering the call of the maternal voice she hears within.

Though a more sustained analysis of female vocality in *Moana* and *Frozen II* is beyond the scope of this paper, the films point to the continued centrality of narratives of "finding one's voice" in the most recent cycle the Disney Princess film. More broadly, the films' attempts to give voice, both literally and figuratively, to female (inter)subjectivity must be understood in relation to the broader significance of the Disney Princess franchise to the Walt Disney Company. During his tenure as CEO, Bob Iger steadily culled Disney's release slate, shrinking the number of films it produces per year and focusing instead on a significantly smaller number of productions: namely, big-budget "event movies" that serve the interests of corporate synergy and readily lend themselves to franchising and merchandising. The Disney Princess film provides precisely the kind of intellectual property that can be exploited across multiple divisions of the conglomerate. Disney's efforts to reboot and "modernize" the Disney Princess film, to realign its cultural connotations and counter perceptions that the trope is regressively patriarchal and aggressively heteronormative, have arguably been central to the renewed profitability of the franchise.[51] The form and function of female vocality in the Disney Princess film has both evolved in direct relation to and helped further these broader industrial and cultural strategies. As *Brave* and *Frozen* suggest, examining how Disney Princess films construct and articulate girls' and women's voices can help us better understand the continued cultural resonance and economic significance of the singing princess and the Disney animated musical.

## NOTES

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7. Fleeger, *Mismatched Women*, 128.
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9. Fleeger, *Mismatched Women*, 128.
10. Robynn Stilwell, "Girls' Voices, Boys' Stories, and Self-Determination in Animated Films since 2012," in *Voicing the Cinema: Film Music and the Integrated Soundtrack*, ed. James Buhler and Hannah Lewis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 132.
11. Robynn Stilwell, "Giving Voice to Girls' Stories in *Brave and Frozen*," paper presented at the *American Musicological Society Annual Meeting* (American Musicological Society Annual Meeting, Louisville, KY, 2015), 3.
12. Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones, eds., *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.
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14. For an analysis of the psychosexual dynamics of these narratives, see Lynda Haas, "Eighty-Six the Mother: Murder, Matricide, and Good Mothers," in *From Mouse to Mermaid*, ed. Elizabeth Bell, Laura Sells, and Lynda Haas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 193–211.
15. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 56.
16. That the audience perceives the prince looking at, and listening in on the princess before she does, in a sense, makes us complicit in his voyeurism and eavesdropping.

17. Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 194.
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20. Heatwole, "Disney Girlhood," 3.
21. Heatwole, "Disney Girlhood," 3.
22. Disney's problematic representations of race, gender, and sexuality, in particular, were the subject of a growing body of critical scholarship on the studio that emerged during this period.
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32. The conflict and ultimate reconciliation of the princess siblings is equally a structuring component of "For the First Time in Forever" and its reprise, which vocally makes manifest the narrative tension between the sisters, by having Elsa and Anna sing in counterpoint.
33. Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 80.
34. Fleeger, "Frozen and the Disney Princess Song."
35. Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 55.
36. Ryan Bunch, "'Love Is an Open Door': Revising and Repeating Disney's Musical Tropes in Frozen," in *Contemporary Musical Film*, ed. K.J. Donnelly and Beth Carroll (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 96.
37. Fleeger, "Frozen and the Disney Princess Song."
38. Stilwell, "Giving Voice to Girls' Stories in Brave and Frozen," 11.
39. Beginning with Tiana in 2010, Disney princesses have been inducted into the Disney Princess line with elaborate, star-studded coronation ceremonies. Rapunzel's coronation ceremony for example, took place at Kensington Palace in London (see "Rapunzel to Get Royal Treatment in London," *CBS News*, October 4, 2011, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rapunzel-to-get-royal-treatment-in-london/). Anna and Elsa, however, have never been officially crowned as Disney princesses. Although the official Disney Princess website features Anna and Elsa, the Frozen franchise has its own separate, highly successful line of merchandise (see Shane O'Neill, "Frozen: Why Anna & Elsa Are NOT Disney Princesses," Screen Rant, April 16, 2020, https://screenrant.com/frozen-anna-elsa-not-disney-princesses-reason/).
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41. While the film's antagonist is ostensibly the demon bear Mor'du, the character is largely tangential to the narrative and ultimately redeemed. The more significant narrative conflict is the strained relationship between Merida and her mother.
42. Ariel's mother is both absent in *The Little Mermaid*, and then promptly (and preposterously) run over by a pirate ship after she is introduced in *The Little Mermaid 3: Ariel's Beginning* (Peggy Holmes, 2008).
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44. Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Yale French Studies*, no. 60 (January 1980): 41.
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46. Dayal, "3-D for Your Ears."
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48. Nicole Sperling, "When the Glass Ceiling Crashed on Brenda Chapman," *Los Angeles Times*, May 25, 2011, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-xpm-2011-may-25-la-et-women-animation-sidebar-20110525-story.html.
49. Roughly one year after *Brave*'s release, a new controversy erupted around Merida following her coronation as an official Disney Princess. In advance of her induction into the franchise, the character underwent a redesign that saw her waist shrink, bust grow, and face mature. This "corporate makeover," which was widely denounced by both fans and

Chapman herself, ultimately prompted Disney quietly to abandon the new design and remove all images and references to the new Merida from its websites.

50. Lin-Manuel Miranda, interview with Rico Gagliano, The Dinner Party Download, podcast audio, February 10, 2017, http://www.dinnerpartydownload.org/lin-manuel-miranda/.
51. While this study has focused on animated features, Disney's live-action remakes of princess films are undoubtedly directly related to these broader industrial trends.

# CHAPTER 6

# "GOING PLACES"

## *Musical Latins in Latin Musicals*

DESIRÉE J. GARCIA

In an early scene in *Copacabana* (Alfred E. Green, 1947), Lionel Devereaux (Groucho Marx) announces to the owner of the eponymous nightclub, "The greatest star in Brazil has just landed in New York!" Hoping to get his client, Carmen Navarro (played by Carmen Miranda), a contract, Lionel arranges for her to audition immediately. As the manager, his assistant, and the "Copa" showgirls watch, Carmen performs a number that reveals how closely based the character is on her star persona, with a bedazzled costume, a cascade of fruit on her head, platform heels, and the Bando da Lua playing behind her.

*Copacabana* was not the first time that Miranda played a character based on her own persona. In previous films, namely *Down Argentine Way* (Irving Cummings, 1940), *That Night in Rio* (Irving Cummings, 1941), and *Four Jills and Jeep* (William A. Seiter, 1944), she also appears as "Carmen," a sign, as Richard Dyer explains in reference to actress Lena Horne, that Hollywood sought to capitalize on and emphasize her difference in otherwise white-cast narratives. Her Otherness could not be integrated into the romantic narratives of such films, so she played roles that were essentially herself, providing entertainment and comedic relief for the white characters in the films.[1]

*Copacabana*, however, offers an exception to Miranda's previous roles. In this film, she is the main female protagonist, takes part in the central romantic plot, and, most provocatively, takes off her "Brazilian bombshell" persona at multiple points. The film follows her efforts to make it in show business, starting at the Copacabana nightclub in New York, and her agent/boyfriend's misguided efforts to help her. When Lionel gets her an audition, she instantly transforms the nightclub into a space of Otherness. Previously, the Copacabana stage had been filled with a dozen Copa showgirls, white American women who sing of their own desire to be discovered and make it to Broadway and Hollywood in the song, "We've Come to the Copa." Carmen's act, by contrast, both looks and sounds different. Her departure from the norm announces, just as Lionel initially indicates, that she has come from far away to be there.

This moment in *Copacabana*, Miranda's first film after the end of her contract with Twentieth Century–Fox, and one of her last films before her death, provides not only another instance of Hollywood's ethnographic stereotyping of actors of color. Its hyperawareness of Miranda's persona and her central role in the romantic plot highlight the way that Hollywood's "Latin" musicals are in essence narratives about foreign encounter; as such, they are critical popular texts for defining the terms by which Latin American and Latinx peoples can be integrated into American life. "Making it" in show business in these films translates into the kind of social and class mobility that constitutes success in the United States. In this way, Hollywood's Latin musicals are stories of movement and mobility, aesthetically given form in song-and-dance sequences on the stage and narratively expressed by characters like Carmen who present themselves in spectacularized form hoping for the public's acceptance. In *Copacabana*, an act of migration frames the first encounter between Carmen and Copacabana management, and it frames her first night's performance; two Copa girls tell the audience in advance of Carmen's entrance, "Keep your eye on this girl. She may go places!"

Musicals are the only other Hollywood genre, aside from Westerns, in which we regularly encounter Latinx and Latin American peoples. In the Western, a genre that derives its meaning from the conflicts surrounding Americans' violent conquest of space on the North American continent, Mexicans play a range of characters, from villainous to comedic to chivalrous. In each respect, their characters justify and make evident the need for white dominance of the region; the villain threatens white American (especially female) safety; the comedic buffoon demonstrates his ineptitude for civilization; and the chivalrous (often Spanish and upper-class) Mexican assists the white protagonists in their goals.[2] In each encounter, however, the conflict over space, who belongs and who does not, is of central concern. The many films produced during the Progressive Era that set their narratives in the borderlands of the United States revealed a preoccupation with such liminal locales, where unstable forms of identity and space caused both fascination and fear. Borderland films revisited the "contact zones" of historical encounters on the frontier and reframed them according to early twentieth-century notions about primitivity and modernity, race, class, and gender.[3]

Contact zones, however, are not unique to the Western and borderland films. In the musical, conflicts over space are just as vital to the genre's form, thematics, and endurance as a form of entertainment. The space in question, however, is interior rather than exterior. The stage is a material location that is created by people for the encounter of a performance and recreated by the makers of Hollywood musicals, and it is a cinematic space that produces and refracts notions of identity and Otherness in American society. In the musical, song, dance, and spectacle are the characters' weapons in battle. In Latin musicals, characters wield those weapons when they have to prove their worthiness, such as Carmen's audition in *Copacabana*. Performances indicate, sometimes explicitly, the acts of migration that it took to wage the battle in the first place.

Latinx and Latin American characters appear most frequently in the backstage musical, which features stories about performers and their backstage lives. Their visual and sonic difference served the genre's reliance on performative spectacle, offering novel things to hear and see for the viewer. The singing and dancing "Latin" also served white Americans' notions of Latin American primitivity, lack of productivity, and susceptibility to the emotions. In his study of blackface minstrelsy, Eric Lott explains how the logic of that entertainment rested on the idea that black Americans were "creatures of feeling," closer to nature and therefore childlike in their orientation to the world.[4] This same logic applies to the representation of Latin American peoples in the musical as singing and dancing Latins who naturally have musical abilities that entertain the viewer, but also validate the treatment of them as inferior, if attractive beings.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the frequent use of the term "Latin" to describe all manner of nationalities, backgrounds, languages, and relationships to the United States was a homogenizing one. Both the "Latin musical" and the depiction of the "musical Latin" circulated reductive notions about Latinx and Latin American peoples. To be sure, the terms of encounter between musical Latins and their white counterparts differed according to time, place, and Hollywood studio. In each, however, the stage constitutes a contact zone, made possible by the movement and mobility of peoples, and promises the potential of American opportunity. In Latin musicals, we regularly witness the genre define the Latin Other and then determine the terms by which s/he can be integrated into American society. While many of these films placed limits on the mobility of Latin performers, there are a critical few that opened up the possibility for a more expansive understanding of identity formation.

What follows is an analysis of the musical Latin in Hollywood's Latin musicals of the 1930s and 1940s, with a specific focus on the genre's relationship to experiences of migration and forms of social and geographic mobility. The essay begins with an examination of how a few Latin American actors crafted such narratives from within the parameters of Hollywood's Spanish-language productions in the 1930s. It explains the forms of encounter offered by the "Good Neighbor era" musicals in which white Americans traveled to Latin American locales to find exotic entertainers in their native land. Finally, I closely examine two films, *Redhead from Manhattan* (Lew Landers, 1943) and *Copacabana* (1947), in which the main characters, Lupe Velez and Carmen Miranda, respectively, play "twinned" versions of themselves, thereby troubling notions of an essentialized identity for either one of them. Both Velez, who was Mexican, and Miranda, who was Portuguese-Brazilian, made these films toward the end of the high point in their careers. Velez's popularity in the *Mexican Spitfire* series had begun to wane by the early 1940s, and Miranda's string of "Good Neighbor" musicals for Twentieth Century–Fox had less appeal once the war ended. That both actresses died soon after making these films makes them a poignant contribution to our understanding of the backstage musical's relationship to the representation of race, ethnicity, and gender, and its ability to simultaneously strengthen and question stable notions of Otherness.

## Musical Latins in Hollywood: Mainstream and Margins

The notion of the musical Latin predates the coming of sound cinema and the film musical. Early American cinema set in the borderlands of the United States and Mexico frequently featured sequences set in cantinas, spaces that were guardedly male except for the “loose” women who danced and drank in them. Some of the first, albeit unnamed, roles for Latinas and Latin American women were set in these geographically and socially liminal spaces.[5] In *The Gaucho* (F. Richard Jones, 1927), Lupe Velez’s first feature film role, the cantina sequence is the meeting site for “the mountain girl” (Velez) and the Gaucho (Douglas Fairbanks Jr.). The mountain girl becomes jealous when a female rival attempts to seduce the Gaucho with her provocative dancing. The mountain girl insists that the Gaucho dance with her and he eagerly responds, tying their bodies together with his whip so that their performance of the tango is literally intertwined. The film presents all three of the characters mentioned here as musical creatures who act out their emotions through spontaneous and passionate forms of dance. Fairbanks’s character is easily identifiable as a “Latin Lover,” a relatively positive, if reductive stereotype of Latin men who seduce women with their charms, their music, and their dancing.[6] Before Fairbanks in *The Gaucho*, Mexican actor Ramon Novarro and Italian actor Rudolph Valentino incarnated this romanticized Latin type in the 1920s. True to form, the Gaucho mesmerizes women merely by looking at them. The mountain girl is under his spell, and along with her competitor, they demonstrate an organic relationship to tango as a form of seduction, less a skill to be performed and more a primitive ritual practiced by highly emotional people.

One of Dolores del Río’s earliest roles, as the half-European, half-American Indian girl “Ramona,” in the film of the same name (*Ramona*, Edwin Carewe, 1928), demonstrates her natural abilities to sing and dance. The film, based on Helen Hunt Jackson’s 1884 romantic novel about ill-fated love in Spanish California, was the first version to cast a non-white actress in the lead role. As a Mexican national, Del Rio brought an authenticity to the part that emphasized the Spanish and later Mexican origins of California. In the film, Ramona is the picture of fun and frivolity and she frequently entertains the hacienda with her music and dancing, conveyed visually if not aurally. In one scene in particular, her stepbrother Felipe instructs her to dance for him and she obliges, instantly turning the hacienda courtyard into a stage and the workers into an audience (as can be seen in ▶ Video example 6.1). Ramona is so closely associated with music in this version of the story that, long after she is widowed by an act of violence against her Native American husband, she returns to the hacienda where only music can restore her to happiness.

Like many of the Latin musicals that would follow, *Ramona* is set in a contact zone wherein different kinds of peoples must work out the terms by which they will coexist, if at all. In these narratives, Latin American characters are always musical creatures who seduce, charm, and entertain audiences made up of people who are not like them. While the majority of such musicals were made primarily for American audiences, which I discuss below, it is important to remember the dozens of musicals that Hollywood made for Spanish-speakers around the world. These musicals, many of them original productions made with significant input from their Latin American stars, influenced the ways that national cinemas in Latin American countries evolved,[7] provided Latin Americans with critical training in and exposure to filmmaking,[8] and, most relevant here, revealed the extent to which experiences of mobility, of crossing national boundaries in search of success, constitute a core foundation of the genre.

As multiple scholars have documented, the rise of Spanish-language Hollywood happened nearly concurrently with sound cinema.[9] Eager to maintain their global dominance, the leaders of the industry began to produce foreign-language films with foreign-language-speaking casts. Lisa Jarvinen estimates that Hollywood made approximately 170 Spanish-language films between 1931 and 1939. While many of these were indeed copies of already existing films in English, and many of them have been lost to history, we have information about a critical few that were original stories written by and starring Latin Americans who intended to reach a broad Spanish-speaking audience.

A number of "Latin" singers, of tangos and rancheras, took part in creating Hollywood's Spanish-language musicals. In each, the performers' own autobiographies, in which they travel from their home country to find success in the United States, inspire the narrative. The musical sequences, furthermore, capitalize on the already established popularity of these singers, whose voices had circulated widely on radio and in Latin American and South American cinemas. Carlos Gardel, an Argentinian performer known for singing the tango, made seven musicals for Paramount Studios between 1931 and 1935. Many of them, as Rielle Navitski points out, cinematically present Gardel as a performer with whom audiences were already familiar. But they also allowed audiences to vicariously experience Gardel's own movements around the globe as a successful singer. In the first of these "journeys," *Las luces de Buenos Aires* (*The Lights of Buenos Aires*, Adelqui Migliar, 1931), he makes the initial move from the countryside of Argentina to the capital city. In subsequent musicals, including *El Tango en Broadway* (*The Tango on Broadway*, Louis J. Gasnier, 1934), *Cuesta Abajo* (*The Downfall*, Louis J. Gasnier, 1934), and *Tango Bar* (John Reinhardt, 1935), he travels from Buenos Aires to New York, Paris, and Barcelona, respectively.[10] Indeed, the stories of these musicals reflect the itinerant lives of musical performers. But they also communicate how Latin peoples participated in narratives of modernity and upward mobility by demonstrating their musical talents in the new medium of sound cinema.

Another tango singer, Chilean Jose Bohr, made a film that is explicitly about these dynamics. For *Hollywood, Ciudad de Ensueño* (*Hollywood, City of Illusion*, 1931), he wrote the script and starred in the film. In it, Bohr plays himself, traveling to Hollywood after winning a talent contest. Working as an actor, he falls in love with an American film star of Westerns, Alice Drexel (Nancy Drexel). Romantic complications, however, leave Bohr heartbroken. In the final scene of the film, he sits on a ship that will take him home, singing the mournful ballad, "Hollywood, City of Illusion." Such a reflexive representation of Bohr's experience offers a stark contrast between the hopes and the realities of being Latin in Hollywood. For much of the film, Bohr is fascinated by the Hollywood studio backlot and longs to be a part of it. That his dreams would be dashed so suddenly and conclusively suggests the ways that for him and many others, Hollywood's dream factory was nothing more than a false promise. Indeed, as Jarvinen has documented, Bohr did leave Hollywood soon after making the film, poised to become a successful filmmaker in both Mexico and Chile in subsequent decades.[11]

Spanish-language production in Hollywood ebbed and flowed during the 1930s, with a resurgence in the latter part of the decade in which Mexican actor and singer Tito Guizar took part. Guizar had won fame in Mexico and the United States with the Mexican musical, *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (*Over on the Big Ranch*; Fernando de Fuentes, 1936). In it, he plays a foreman on a hacienda where he demonstrates the qualities of a *charro*; he is chivalrous, brave, an accomplished equestrian, and a serenader of women. Distributed by United Artists, the film introduced a new kind of musical picture, the *comedia ranchera* (ranch comedy), to Mexican cinema, and won Guizar a contract at Paramount Studios. While he made a number of English-language films, including Westerns and the musical *Tropic Holiday* (Theodore Reed, 1938), Hollywood's simulation of *Rancho Grande*, he also made several original Spanish-language productions. Among them was *Papa Soltero* (*Bachelor Father*, Richard Harlan, 1939).

In this film, like in *Hollywood, Ciudad de Ensueño*, the protagonist plays a version of himself. Carlos (Guizar) travels from the Mexican side of the border to Los Angeles in search of information on a deceased family member. Leaving his friends behind with a tearful song of departure, "Yo Ya Me Voy" ("I'm Going"), Carlos travels north and finds himself in the disorienting urban sprawl of Los Angeles. There, he cares for an orphaned Mexican girl, who is also hoping to be reunited with her family. They meet a cast of immigrant characters in their boarding house and one of them helps Guizar to make money by performing in a nightclub. In dual strokes of fate, he finds out that the nightclub was left to him by his deceased uncle and he realizes that the friend he made in the nightclub is the young orphan's older sister. The film ends happily as families are reunited and Carlos sends for his friends in Mexico, guaranteeing them all a job at his new nightclub. Notably, the film does not champion individual success above all else, a distinctly American ideal. Instead, Carlos makes the crucial decision to share his gains, effectively recreating Mexican kinship structures on the other side of the border.[12]

While the musicals discussed here explicitly reflect on the migrant experience to the United States, by far the majority of Hollywood's Latin musicals emphasized mobility of another sort, that of its white characters who travel to exotic locales in search of romance and adventure.[13] Guizar's *Tropic Holiday* is one such film in which a Hollywood producer (Ray Milland) and his assistant (Martha Raye) journey to Mexico in order to get ideas for a new musical. There, they encounter a cantina girl (Dorothy Lamour) and a charro (Guizar) who help both characters, respectively, conquer their Yankee inhibitions and find love. These musicals, and many others, were made during the Good Neighbor era, the period in which the United States attempted to revise its historically hostile relationship to Latin American nations in the face of rising fascism in Europe.

Initiated by the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration, the Good Neighbor Policy extended through the end of World War II. It facilitated a number of cultural exchange efforts, with the goal of making Americans and Latin Americans intelligible to one another. Hollywood participated in these efforts with relatively positive, if anachronistic, representations ranging from *Flying Down to Rio* (Thornton Freeland, 1933), in which the Mexican actress Dolores Del Rio plays a Brazilian woman, *Under the Pampas Moon* (James Tinling, 1935), in which the Spanish actress Rita Hayworth plays an Argentinian, and *Brazil* (Joseph Santley, 1944), which features Tito Guizar as a Brazilian (rather than Mexican) singer. While the Production Code Administration hired "cultural experts" like Addison Durland to assist them with "the demands of authenticity" during World War II, as Brian O'Neil argues, "the final version of Hollywood's Latin images usually fell somewhere between Durland's orders and the producers' desire to have Latin characters retain their traditional comic or exotic function."[14]

The majority of these musicals featured Latin American entertainers, Carmen Miranda being the most popular, but they did not fully integrate them into their narratives. In a film like *Down Argentine Way* (Irving Cummings, 1940), for example, Glenda Crawford (Betty Grable), a young American woman, travels to Argentina and falls in love with a rich racetrack owner (Don Ameche). While there, she visits a nightclub where "Carmen Miranda" is performing. Replicating her performance from an earlier Broadway show, *The Streets of Paris* (1939), Miranda sings two numbers for Glenda and the nightclub audience. Along with the Nicholas Brothers who also make an appearance, Miranda is there to be looked at and enjoyed as part of the local color, but she does not take part in the larger romantic plot. To be sure, this kind of narrative segregation, Sean Griffin argues, opened up possibilities for the performers to exert greater control over the reception of their performances, which were filmed continuously with the performer at the center.[15] But it remains clear that the balance of power in such films was weighted toward the white protagonists. After *Down Argentine Way*, Miranda quickly proved that she had comic abilities and entertained audiences as both a singer and an actress in subsequent musicals at Twentieth Century–Fox. Her parts at the studio, however, remained on the sidelines, providing comic relief to balance the more dramatic roles played by Alice Faye and Betty Grable.

The stakes are high for such musicals if we are to consider, as Ana M. López writes, that "Hollywood does not represent ethnics and minorities: it creates them and provides its audience with an experience of them."[16] As we know from Hollywood's Spanish-language productions in the 1930s, Latin American performers were active in the industry and, when given the opportunity, explored narratives and characters that reflected their contemporary existence as modern and mobile beings. By restricting Latin Americans to their roles as onstage entertainers, and denying or limiting their participation in the larger plot structure, Hollywood's Good Neighbor musicals implicitly created "an experience of them" that preserved their Otherness, thereby forestalling the possibility that they might integrate into American society. Even in a film like *The Gang's All Here* (Busby Berkeley, 1943), in which Miranda plays a New York nightclub performer, presumably working and living in the United States, she still remains a "spectacle of ethnicity," without any ambition of her own except to advance the romantic goals of the two white American stars.[17]

While the big-budget, Technicolor musicals made during the 1940s have received a great deal of attention, they offer only one kind of narrative and formal system for encountering Latins. A consideration of smaller, black and white musicals from the same era reveals a broader range of Latin American representation and more complicated generic language in stories about performers and backstage life. Two films in particular, *Redhead from Manhattan* and *Copacabana*, use the self-reflexivity of the genre to underscore spectacle as illusion and identity as unstable. In the subsequent two films I will discuss, these self-reflexive qualities of the genre predominate, ultimately calling into question the very nature of musical and ethnic Otherness.

## *Redhead from Manhattan* (1943)

*Redhead from Manhattan* begins with an act of migration and encounter. After a German submarine torpedoes a ship sailing for New York, strangers Rita (Lupe Velez) and Jimmy (Michael Duane) are the only survivors. Stranded on a raft, Rita explains that she was a stowaway aboard the ship, hoping to make it to New York to become a great entertainer "like Carmen Miranda." Without "passaport papers," however, she could not board the ship as a passenger like Jimmy (Figure 6.1). Upon reaching shore, they begin to explore around, and find a Nazi flag buried in the woods. When nearby hunters come upon them, they assume Rita and Jimmy are "saboteurs" intent on invading the United States. Rita and Jimmy flee from the hunters and fear that police everywhere will be looking for them. Rita finds her cousin Maria, who has become "a big star on Broadway,"

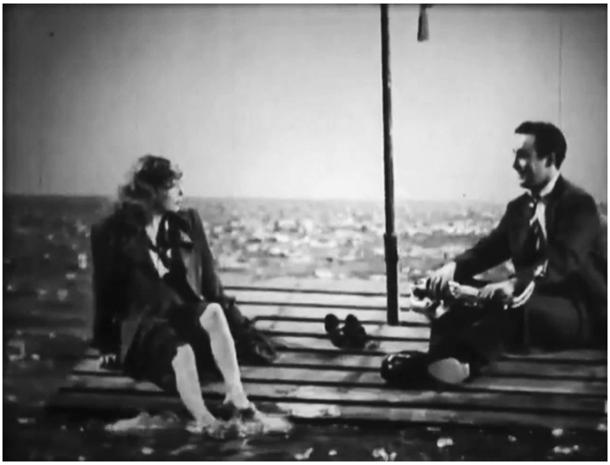

**FIGURE 6.1** Rita (Lupe Velez) illegally immigrates to the United States in *Redhead from Manhattan* (Lew Landers, 1943).

and agrees to perform in her place while Maria has a baby. Maria's agent, Mike (Tim Ryan), swears Rita to secrecy about the arrangement. Rita must comply or Mike will expose her as a "fifth communist" [sic] to the authorities.

These various plot twists, as illogical as they are, place the film in dialogue with the contemporary experience of Mexican migration to the United States. Rita's arrival, which includes the illegal crossing of a body of water, echoes the migration experience of Mexicans crossing the Rio Grande. Her immediate identification as a "saboteur" references fears about Mexican and Mexican American susceptibility to the Axis Powers' anti-American message. In Los Angeles, where Velez and the film's makers lived, inflammatory news reports that Mexican "fifth columnists" were infiltrating the city abounded. These fears were particularly acute in 1942 and 1943, the years *Redhead* was made and released, when the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial and the Zoot Suit Riots signaled to white Angelenos that Mexican youth gangs were running amok.[18] Amidst this extrafilmic political backdrop, Rita's act of illegal immigration renders her a criminal and leads to a series of encounters that force her to hide her real self to avoid deportation.

*Redhead* is an allegory, albeit a comedic one, about the experience of being a Mexican migrant in the United States. But it is also a story about what it means to be Rita da Silva/Lupe Velez. By *Redhead*'s release in May 1943, Velez had been the star of seven films in the *Mexican Spitfire* series, RKO's successful string of comedies. As "Carmelita," she embodies all of the stereotypes of the Mexican female Other: she is attractive, but fiery, and ultimately contained by a self-possessed, white American male. As López notes, by 1943, "the series was described as increasingly redundant, contrived, and patently 'absurd' by the press." RKO canceled the series after the last installment, *Mexican Spitfire's Blessed Event* (Leslie Goodwins, 1943), released just two months after *Redhead*.[19]

In some ways, *Redhead* is a continuation of Velez's spitfire persona. From the first scene on the raft, she demonstrates her quick temper and her spontaneous, passionate nature. Jimmy, being the sober and calm American, finds her attractive and the two embark on a narrative trajectory that ultimately unites them romantically, suggesting the kind of inter-ethnic relationship that *Spitfire* comedically explored. Moreover, as in that series, Velez plays a Mexican entertainer who has dreams of being a star in the United States. It causes conflict between her and her American husband's family in *Spitfire*, and it produces an immigration dilemma in *Redhead*. Nevertheless, Velez's character, like the Latin American characters in most Hollywood musicals, have the natural ability to entertain. Such films do not provide scenes of rehearsal in which the performer hones her craft, much like Ruby Keeler's characters in the Warner Bros. musicals of the early 1930s. Rather, characters like Velez's are innately musical and ready to entertain at a moment's notice. In an early scene in *Redhead*, Rita and Jimmy evade the police by pretending to be part of a jazz band. Jimmy asks her if she knows the number, to which she replies: "I know any number. I make my own words, they're always better." Rita takes the stage, to the surprise of the band members, and immediately reveals that she can easily adapt with her own lyrics and dance steps. The film shows us her performance from multiple directions, emphasizing the pleased reactions of the band's members, Jimmy, the audience, and even the policeman himself. As a musical Latin, Rita, it seems, was born to entertain.

For all the ways that *Redhead* essentializes Velez's Mexican character, the film ultimately upends notions of fixed identity. First and foremost, it does so by doubling Velez's presence in the film. The actress plays both Rita and her identical cousin, Maria. Their uncanny resemblance leads to any number of misidentifications by Jimmy, Maria's husband, Maria's agent, and of course, the audience of Maria's Broadway show. Rita agrees to help Maria by impersonating the Broadway star so that the latter can leave the stage to have a baby. In agreeing to pretend to be Maria for the duration of her cousin's pregnancy, Rita fulfills her dream of being a star, but at the same time she must become an alternate version of herself.

Rita assumes Maria's identity only after her cousin has undergone an indentity transformation herself. Maria's show-business pseudonym is "Elaine Manners," an upper-class singer of a diverse songbook that includes tropical numbers and a song called "Keep Them Happy" in which she wears a Belle Époque era gown. When the cousins first reunite in Maria's dressing room, the differences are readily apparent (Figure 6.2). While Rita speaks with a high-pitched, heavy accent and misuses words, Maria/Elaine has a warmer voice that, while accented, sounds refined and educated. Maria/Elaine has multiple trappings of an upper-middle-class existence, with elegant clothes, a sumptuous dressing room, and the ultimate symbol of being a star, a black maid (Lillian Yarbo), to attend to her (as can be seen in ▶ Video example 6.2).

With this dual character structure, the film offers multiple points for questioning Velez's well-established persona. Through intersecting discourses of race, class, and gender, *Redhead* demonstrates that Velez's identity is mutable. Rita discards her spitfire qualities and achieves class mobility by becoming Maria/Elaine. While training for this ultimate disguise, Rita masquerades as the black maid, wearing blackface makeup

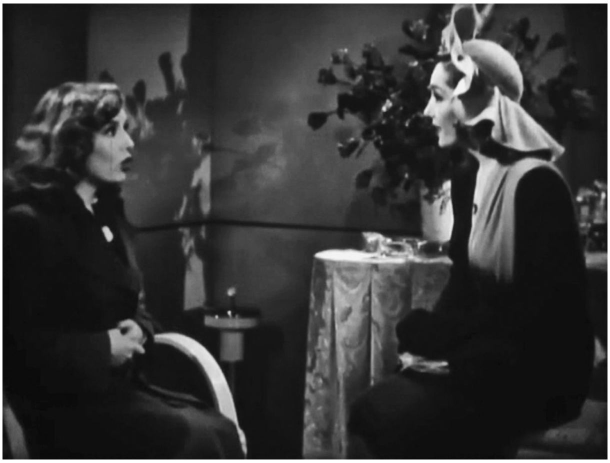

**FIGURE 6.2** Rita and Maria (both played by Lupe Velez) reunite in the dressing room in *Redhead from Manhattan* (Lew Landers, 1943).

and speaking with a stereotypical drawl. And when Maria/Elaine returns with her baby, causing alarm among all the men in the two women's lives, Rita poses briefly as an unwed mother. In each instance, we see the identity of the Latinx performer as complex, her light skin and shift in speech allowing her to transcend class boundaries. When Rita assumes the role of the blackface minstrel by impersonating the black maid, she at once emphasizes her own Whiteness and indicates the extent to which race is a performative spectacle of its own. Finally, *Redhead* demonstrates that gender expectations for women in show business produced anxiety among female performers, their romantic partners, and their employers. Through the technique of doubling, revealing Velez as able to perform both the lower- and upper-class Mexican, the white and black woman, and the single and married female performer, *Redhead* reveals the mutability of these identities, especially where Velez the actress is concerned.

The number "I'm the Undecided Kind," which Rita performs in the guise of Elaine Manners, gives musical expression to the film as a whole (as can be seen in ▶ Video example 6.3). In the song, Rita describes how she enjoys different states of being and talking ("Should I be cold as ice / Or as hot as a Pair of dice / I'm the undecided kind / 'Cause I can't make up my mind"). She demonstrates her protean ability to portray a European ballerina and then quickly shift to an impersonation of Carmen Miranda and a flamenco dancer. Shuffling through these various identities, Velez reveals there are multiple ways of being a musical Latin and that by embodying each one in succession, she conveys that none are absolute. In many ways, *Redhead* belies the ways that a Latina performer like Velez, as a Mexican and as a woman, was betwixt and between in Hollywood. Her constriction to being a "spitfire" for the majority of her career and her ultimate suicide due to fears about being an unwed mother convey just how tenuous and damaging such migrations to Hollywood can be.

## *COPACABANA* (1947)

Velez's multiple references to Carmen Miranda in *Redhead from Manhattan* are a testament to the latter star's popularity, and her distinctive performance style, at the time of the film's release. While Miranda was never the star of the Twentieth Century–Fox musicals she made during the war years, she was nevertheless a significant draw. As Shari Roberts argues, Miranda had particular appeal to American women, who made up the majority of these musicals' domestic audience. For Miranda, who had already established herself as a successful singer, dancer, and actress in Brazil in the 1930s, the negotiation of Broadway, Hollywood, and American geopolitics of the 1940s was a challenge she met with a series of moves to remain in control of her image. These included designing her spectacular "Bahían" costume (an appropriation of Afro-Brazilian female dress), insisting that she be accompanied by her own Bando da Lua, and using direct address to the camera in her onscreen performances.[20] For Roberts, these moves were critical to Miranda's domestic popularity and provide a nuanced reading of her otherwise stereotypical images of Otherness: "While Miranda's parodic star text offers various negative images of Latin Americans and of women, her persona also reveals these images as stereotypes, allowing for negotiated readings by fans." Miranda's brand of "feminine and ethnic excess," was, as Roberts argues, "a spectacle that ultimately puts into question both feminine and foreign stereotyping."[21] Emphasizing alternate readings of Miranda's films at Twentieth Century–Fox, enabled by the extrafilmic star texts like fan magazines and radio interviews, Roberts offers a reading of the Brazilian star that accounts for her endurance as a cultural icon.

But if there is any film that comments directly on Miranda's star text as a construction of her own making, it is the first musical she made after ending her contract with the Hollywood studio. *Copacabana*, like *Redhead from Manhattan*, operates on multiple self-reflexive registers. Like all backstage musicals, there is a show-within-the-show as Carmen struggles to succeed in show business. The film is also an advertisement for the actual Copacabana nightclub in New York City. Monte Proser, the club's owner, coproduced the film and arranged for the film's premiere to take place at his establishment in order to coincide with Miranda's opening as the Copacabana's star entertainer, effectively replicating the narrative arc of the film.[22] As *Variety* reported, the "Nitery show thus will have the novel function of serving as a living trailer for the picture with lots of exploitation possibilities seen in the mutual tieup." It was a "windfall" of exploitation opportunities, the article observed, with "the Latin comedienne using full score which she sang in the picture."[23]

Beyond the exploitation of the film and its unique arrangement with the venue where it is set, *Copacabana* is singular in Miranda's career for the ways it offers her the opportunity to play a new role, not just as the central protagonist, but as an entirely different embodied cultural figure. In his efforts to get her a contract at the nightclub, Lionel is successful, but when asked what other kinds of singers he manages, he makes one up. "Mademoiselle Fifi," Lionel says, is a French chanteuse, exactly the kind the manager is looking for to entertain his audiences in his cocktail lounge. Committed to producing two singers instead of one, Lionel convinces Carmen to impersonate Fifi. The manager unknowingly hires Carmen twice, as the Brazilian singer Carmen Navarro, to be featured in the dining room, and as the French chanteuse Mademoiselle Fifi, to perform in the more "intimate" cocktail lounge. Carmen is initially wary about the arrangement, but in the name of pursuing her career and, more important, paying rent and buying food, she acquiesces. As Carmen Navarro, Carmen dresses and performs as Carmen Miranda. In stark contrast, Carmen plays Fifi as a beautiful and seductive blonde, with curls piled on the top of her head and wearing a light-colored satin evening gown and a veil (to hide her true identity). Rather than singing heavily syncopated samba music, to which Carmen's voice and full body respond with equally dynamic rhythm, Fifi sings ballads in French and limits her movements to fluid hand gestures.

The audition sequences for each singer reveal the extent to which the aesthetics of the musical film alter according to Carmen's dual personas. For Carmen's audition, the camera remains almost entirely at a distance, framing the full length of the singer's body (as can be seen in ▶ Video example 6.4). Carmen enters the stage in long shot, wearing

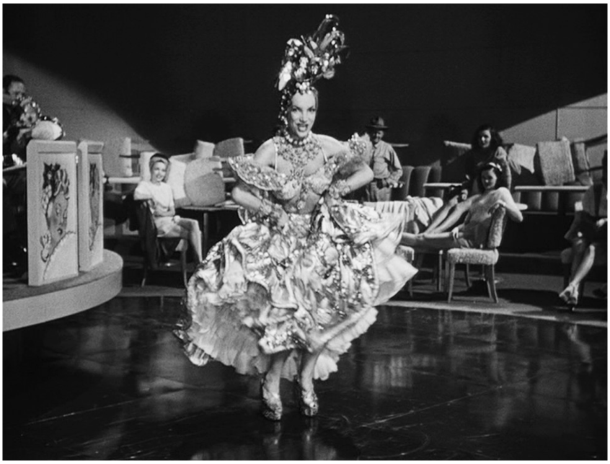

**FIGURE 6.3** Carmen Navarro (Carmen Miranda) auditions at the Copacabana. *Copacabana* (Alfred E. Green, 1947).

one of her quintessential midriff-bearing gowns and a large turban on her head (Figure 6.3). The framing allows for Carmen's vibrant performance style to be featured, intruded upon only several times by cuts away to Lionel and Steve, the Copa manager, looking amused. Carmen still manages to achieve a closeness with the audience, however, by dancing toward the camera, from long shot to medium close-up and out again. One of these forward movements signals the end of her performance, and the film cuts to a framing of Carmen from behind. Her body stands to the left of the frame, facing her audience who applaud her. The audience occupies nearly the entire shot and the light illuminates their pleased faces. Carmen's back, as foregrounded as it is, stands in shadow by comparison. The film's aesthetics therefore deliver the anticipated performance of Carmen Miranda, but ends with a shot that highlights her status as a performer who must do the work pleasing her audience.

By contrast, Fifi's audition necessitates a different set of cinematic techniques (as can be seen in ▶ Video example 6.5). Soon after settling on Fifi's disguise, inspired by a veiled woman on an advertisement for cigarettes, the film dissolves to a close-up of Carmen as the ad's real-life manifestation. Rather than long shots, Fifi's number is dominated by close-ups and medium close-ups, emphasizing Carmen's disguise, but also reflecting the shift in performance style (Figure 6.4). Restrained and graceful, Fifi communicates with her eyes and hands rather than her body. As though to emphasize the efficacy of Carmen's ruse and its heightened appeal, the film also features her audience more prominently in this number. Multiple shots of Lionel, the manager, and the Copa girls, gazing admiringly at Fifi, render this sequence one of desire rather than appreciation. And in the few long shots of Fifi's performance, the rapt audience occupies either the background or the foreground, communicating the singer's success. The final shot mirrors Carmen's, however, with Fifi's figure in the foreground of the frame, standing to the left and facing away from the camera, while her audience claps enthusiastically. Again, we

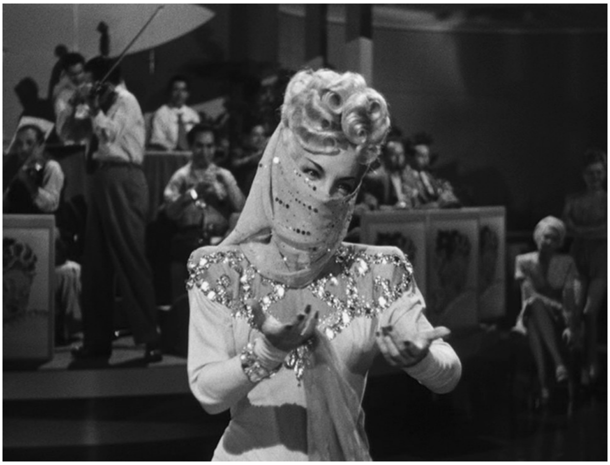

**FIGURE 6.4** Mademoiselle Fifi (Carmen Miranda) auditions at the Copacabana. *Copacabana* (Alfred E. Green, 1947).

are left with a composition that centers the dynamics of performer and audience, specifically, how one must conceive and execute an image in service to the other.

As Lupe Velez demonstrates in *Redhead*'s "I'm the Undecided Kind" number, Carmen Miranda proves equally adept at playing both types of performers. She experiences both personal transformation and social mobility as a result. But for her character, the strain of being two types of female performers begins to take its toll. In a remarkable sequence that relies on the use of dissolves, the film makes Carmen's strain obvious to the audience (as can be seen in ▶ Video example 6.6). Both Carmen and Fifi perform on the same night and each one has her own dressing room, dressing rooms #4 and #2, respectively. The film gives us a close-up of Fifi's door. The image dissolves to Fifi at her dressing table while Lionel frantically yanks off her veil and her blonde wig, urging her to change faster (Figure 6.5). Hysterically, she screams, "Leave me alone!" and pushes him away. Another dissolve reveals a close-up of Carmen's door; the image slides off the screen simultaneously with a dissolve that shows a close-up of Carmen sitting at her dressing table, angrily patting powder on her face. In a dozen more edits that replicate the pattern of dressing door close-up/shot dissolve and slide/shot of Fifi or Carmen/ dressing door close-up, each successive shot appearing with increasing speed, the film gives visual expression to Carmen's labor at creating and recreating two versions of herself. The sequence ends inside Carmen's dressing room. She frantically runs toward the door, dressed as Carmen Navarro, but wearing the veil. Lionel rips it off of her just as she exits. Utterly confused and exhausted by the demands of show business, Carmen can no longer keep her two identities distinct.

Throughout the film, the Copacabana management, the audience, and Hollywood producers reveal their preference for Fifi. She is by far the desired object in the film, as Steve explains to Fifi, "Carmen's alright, but you're different. . . . Carmen can't compare with you!" Steve's affections toward Fifi not only complicate Carmen's relationship

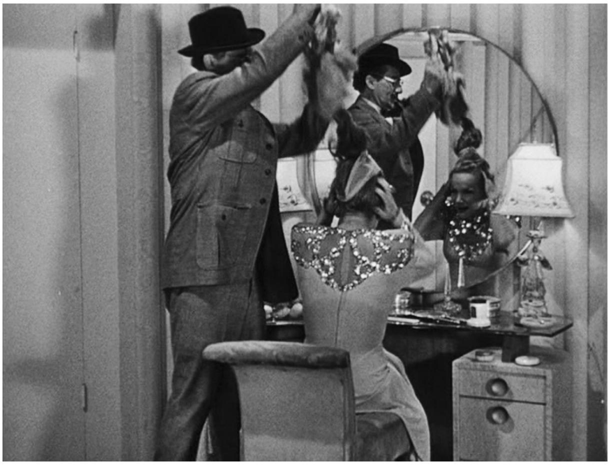

**FIGURE 6.5** Lionel (Groucho Marx] violently pulls off Fifi's wig as Carmen Navarro (Carmen Miranda) quickly changes her persona in the dressing room. *Copacabana* (Alfred E. Green, 1947).

with Lionel, but they worry Steven's young assistant who carries a torch for him. And Fifi's success in love parallels her rapid rise to fame. The Copa girls may have introduced Carmen Navarro as a girl who was "going places," but in reality, it is Fifi who has the most mobility. Fifi attracts a Hollywood producer who wants to give her a contract; meanwhile, Carmen remains a mere nightclub entertainer. Realizing they need to do something drastic, Carmen and Lionel devise a plan to "kill Fifi" in Carmen's dressing room, declaring that they "built up Fifi into a Mrs. Frankenstein." Carmen impersonates both herself and Fifi in a screaming match, which attracts Steve and others to listen in through the door. When the yelling turns into fighting, effected by Carmen's simulation of slapping sounds and breaking glass vases and windows, the men force their way in. Carmen remains in the middle of the room standing triumphantly, declaring that Fifi crashed through the window and ran away. Lionel later "disposes" of Fifi, throwing "her veil and the whole outfit" into the East River.

*Copacabana* reveals a different kind of encounter for the musical Latin, one that is made possible by the erasure of her Latin identity and the assumption of a new, more desirable one. Carmen's diminished appeal in the film is voiced by Lionel in the scene described above. To make her angry enough to fight Fifi, Lionel taunts, "You Brazilian ham, who ever told you you could sing?" And in simulating Fifi, Carmen herself yells with a French accent, "I kill you, you Brazilian pig!" Combined with the frenzied and harrowing shots of Carmen shifting from one persona to the other, these moments in the film provide self-reflexive commentary on the nature of being Carmen Miranda as she transitioned from her success, albeit limited, at Twentieth Century–Fox. Miranda's role(s) in *Copacabana* are both Others from a foreign land, but as the film insinuates, had Miranda been blonde and French, she may have been able to transcend certain ethnic and gendered constrictions.

Once the film opened, Miranda assumed the role as nightclub entertainer per her contract. She was, reportedly, the highest paid performer in the club's history, attesting to her enduring appeal among New York audiences. In a review of the show, *Variety* described the act as a mix of old and new. While she delivered her "theme songs" from the Twentieth Century–Fox musicals, including "Souse American Way," "Mama eu quero," and "I-I-I Like You Very Much," the main attraction of the evening was the material from *Copacabana.* Having dyed her hair blonde in keeping with her "Fifi" character, Miranda interspersed both Carmen's and Fifi's numbers, shifting easily between both. These numbers, especially Fifi's songs, the reviewer commented, should have dominated the show, arguing, "if she dwelt more on new material, she'd be one of the great café artists." Striking a balance between what is expected from a Latin performer and what she is capable of, Miranda was candid in the "charming, informal gab" between numbers. The reviewer notes how much of her monologue reflected on her constructed image: "She kids her garb, her physical buildup, and Hollywood for ingratiating results," even going so far as to talking frankly about her salary at the Copa, which, the reviewer complained, "goes beyond the bounds of good taste."[24] Miranda performed the "Brazilian bombshell" persona in both the film and its real-life setting, but she also offered her audience the tools with which to dismantle it.

The final scenes of both *Redhead from Manhattan* and *Copacabana* return their respective characters to their original identities. In the former, Rita finds relief from impersonating her cousin and resumes being herself, an immigrant with prospects of marrying an American so that she can become a legal resident. In the latter, Carmen reveals to the police that she was both Carmen and Fifi all along, thus inspiring a Hollywood movie in which Carmen stars as a "Brazilian bombshell" once more. The backstage musical enables such self-reflexive plot twists, exploring the show-within-the-show by featuring the lives of performers both on and off stage. In backstage musicals like the two discussed above, in which the identity of the performer is itself featured as a creative production, the genre's themes of private versus public personas, and reality versus fiction, take center stage. Such themes become particularly charged when the performers in question are racial and ethnic Others like Carmen Miranda and Lupe Velez, both of whom ultimately succumbed to the pressures of pursuing careers in show business.

As musical Latins, Miranda and Velez operated within a discourse of musical spectacularization that had circulated since the beginnings of cinema. For Latinx and Latin American performers, their cultural currency in Hollywood rested on their abilities to persuasively deliver song-and-dance performances that conveyed their social difference as individuals and as a people. We see this dynamic at work in films set in contact zones where different peoples meet, including early twentieth-century dramas and comedies set in borderlands spaces, Westerns, and in the Latin musicals of the Good Neighbor era.

Contact zones occur, however, because of acts of mobility and migration, themes that have also inflected the Latin musicals discussed here. A consideration of Hollywood's Spanish-language musicals of the 1930s, and two films in the 1940s made outside of

Velez's and Miranda's more conventional roles, demonstrates the extent to which contact with American show business has been a recurring theme in the genre. In the former, Latin American performers wielded self-reflexive narratives to convey an experience of migration that was complex, but ever a reality. And in *Redhead from Manhattan* and *Copacabana*, Velez and Miranda reveal themselves to be highly mobile individuals, first migrating to the United States, then crafting a series of personal transformations, and finally, demonstrating their acumen as performers who win acceptance on the American stage. In this way, Latin musicals, and musical Latins, have contributed directly and persistently to contemporary debates about who can participate in narratives of American mobility, and on what terms.

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# CHAPTER 7

# PERFORMING WHITENESS THROUGH THE FIRST-GENERATION AMERICAN IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE FROM *VIENNESE NIGHTS* TO *PITCH PERFECT*

## WILLIAM A. EVERETT

Hollywood has a legacy rooted in whiteness. This was highlighted at the 87th Academy Awards in 2015, which ignited the #OscarsSoWhite controversy after all twenty of the actors nominated in the lead and supporting actor categories were white. Whiteness scholar and speaker Robin DiAngelo describes whiteness as those aspects of being a white person "that go beyond mere physical differences and are related to the meaning and resultant material advantage of being defined as white in society: what is granted and how it is granted based on that meaning. Instead of the typical focus on how racism hurts people of color, to examine whiteness is to focus on how racism elevates white people."[1] It is possible from a sociological perspective for one to become white. Philip Q. Yang and Kavitha Koshy refer to this process as a "change in social status from a minority group to part of the majority or dominant group."[2]

The connected ideas of whiteness and becoming white characterize the experiences of first-generation immigrants to the United States in Hollywood musicals ranging from the genre's early years to the series of *Pitch Perfect* films that appeared between 2012 and 2017. Western European immigrants, being white, are afforded opportunities to elevate themselves, as in *Viennese Nights* (1930, Warner Bros.) and *Up in Central Park* (1948, Universal). Latin American immigrants, if they are light-skinned, become physically and aurally exoticized and provide non-threatening sexual innuendo, as is the case with Carmen Miranda's characters in *Springtime in the Rockies* (1942, Twentieth Century–Fox) and *The*

*Gang's All Here* (1943, Twentieth Century–Fox). In a pair of biopics about European immigrant musicians, *The Great Caruso* (1951, MGM) and *Deep in My Heart* (1954, MGM), Enrico Caruso and Sigmund Romberg can become American—and white—in part through their marriages to white socialites. Asian immigrants, the eventual so-called model minority, like Latin Americans, are portrayed as exotic in *Flower Drum Song* (1961, Universal); their situations are complicated by the younger generation wanting to assimilate. All of these images are reinforced in the series of *Pitch Perfect* films (2012, 2015, 2017, Universal), in which a white immigrant from Australia is afforded the greatest advantages while Latinx and Asian (along with African American) characters get pushed to the sidelines and are subjected to established stereotypes.

This essay will investigate ways in which the Hollywood musical depicts first-generation immigrants to the United States and how music infuses plot lines in terms of the protagonists' professions or avocations. In all the films listed above, at least one immigrant protagonist is a musician. This device allows for diegetic performances of musical numbers, which attends to the film medium's need to explain why people might sing and dance. What are notably minimized, on the other hand, are the interior-focused songs in which characters suspend time to express their inner thoughts. Such defining aspects of a musical, whether on stage or screen, simply aren't the focus in these films, which therefore really become stories that include immigrant musicians.

## MUSICAL AND NON-MUSICAL EUROPEANS: *VIENNESE NIGHTS* AND *UP IN CENTRAL PARK*

In 1917, the United States enacted its first widely restrictive act concerning immigration. Beyond establishing specific quotas for the number of immigrants from each country, a literacy test in any language was now required for all immigrants over age sixteen. The 1924 Immigration Act adjusted the national origin quotas to increase the number of visas available to residents of the British Isles and Western Europe while further limiting those for people from Southern and Eastern Europe. Immigrants from Asia and Africa were excluded, and no quotas were applied to people living in the Western Hemisphere. According to the Office of the Historian for the US Department of State, "In all of its parts, the most basic purpose of the 1924 Immigration Act was to preserve the ideal of U.S. homogeneity."[3]

This "ideal of U.S. homogeneity" is rooted in whiteness. Immigrants, in order to succeed, had to become white. They had to move from being part of a minority group to members of the majority group. In colonial America and into the nineteenth century, that majority group consisted of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs). During the nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries, as Yang and Koshy assert,

> Non-WASP Europeans "became white" through assimilation or by becoming very similar to WASPs culturally, economically, and structurally. Once the WASPs

> decided to no longer severely stigmatize them for being ethnically different from the WASPs, these European groups were allowed into American whiteness.[4]

Immigrants from Austria and Ireland were among those who could become white in this sense, as is the case in *Viennese Nights* (1930, Warner Bros.) and *Up in Central Park* (1948, Universal).[5] *Viennese Nights* offered its viewers a nostalgic and bittersweet tale of a young violinist-composer who leaves Vienna and his young love behind when he follows an entrepreneurial friend to a new life in America. *Up in Central Park* concerns a young Irish woman who dreams of becoming an opera singer in New York and arrives in America with her widowed father. Both films, which feature music by Sigmund Romberg (1887–1951), himself an immigrant, offer highly romanticized views of the European immigrant experience. While the immigrant experiences in both stories come from the nineteenth century, before the 1917 Act began to limit the number of newcomers to the United States, the films themselves reflect the tenor after the Immigration Act of 1924 went into effect. Because the protagonists have become white, they possess material advantage that provides them the opportunity to succeed in their adopted homeland.

Oscar Hammerstein II's plot for *Viennese Nights* was quintessential operetta fare in the sentimental vein. The film opens in Vienna in 1890. Otto Stirner (Alexander Gray), a poor musician, and Elsa Hofner (Vivienne Segal), a shoemaker's daughter, fall in love. Otto writes a song for Elsa, the heartfelt ballad "I'll Bring a Love Song." After Elsa's father forces her to marry a nobleman, Otto leaves for New York with his friend Gus (Bert Roach), who plans to enter the delicatessen business. Otto ends up playing second violin in a theater orchestra, marries a shrewish woman, Emma, who belittles him for pursuing music rather than joining Gus in his lucrative pickle business, and bears a music-loving son. Decades later, Elsa's granddaughter meets Otto's grandson, who is also a composer. The grandson has written a large-scale work that incorporates his grandfather's theme, "I'll Bring a Love Song." After the work is performed in Vienna, the two young people decide to remain together and thus enjoy the romantic companionship that eluded their grandparents.[6]

The film reflects two different realizations of the immigrant experience that Hammerstein maps onto a traditional operetta canvas. In many operettas, two pairs of lovers appear, one romantic and one comic. In *Viennese Nights*, the romantic pair, Otto and Elsa, are not together at the end, adding a bittersweet dimension to the story. This emotive aspect is intensified when Otto's life in America is portrayed as unfulfilling and even dismal. His wife shrieks at him for wasting his time with music, and probably due to his dreary home life, Otto appears bored and dejected in the scenes where he is playing violin in the theater orchestra. By contrast, the comic couple, Gus and his similarly tempered wife, Gretl (Louise Fazenda), do succeed in America, and when Elsa is in New York with her ambassador husband, they tell her that they don't think much of Otto's American wife. If one doesn't succeed in America, according to the film's narrative, it is one's own fault. A positive attitude and a sense of humor, exemplified by Gus and Gretl, can help immensely. But if one remains forlorn and downcast, enters a loveless marriage, and loses hope—like Otto—the American dream will remain elusive. Even Otto's elegant English cannot help him succeed, whereas Gus's Viennese accent does not deter his success, especially in the food business, where it actually becomes an asset. The bottom line is that these white European immigrants have opportunity.

This theme reappears in the Hollywood adaptation of *Up in Central Park*. The stage musical, with lyrics by Dorothy Fields and book by Herbert Fields,[7] enjoyed a highly successful Broadway run of 504 performances after it opened on January 27, 1945, at the New Century Theatre.[8] The Currier and Ives–inspired storyline took place against the exposure of the corruption of Boss Tweed, who through his Tammany Hall machine controlled much of New York politics in the early 1870s. Many plot details and several subplots were simplified or removed for the film. All but three of the songs that made *Up in Central Park* a success on Broadway were similarly scrapped.

In Karl Tunberg's screenplay, a young Irish woman called Rosie (Deanna Durbin) and her illiterate father, Timothy (Albert Sharpe), arrive at Ellis Island on a ship filled with light-skinned immigrants to start new lives in their adopted homeland. Filled with optimism and hope, Rosie leads her fellow passengers in a luxuriant waltz newly created for the film, "Oh, Say Can You See (What I See)," the patriotic fervor of which is magnified through a musical allusion to the opening of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Not everyone in New York bears goodwill toward the immigrants, and there are of course those who want to take advantage of them. Among the latter is the notorious Boss Tweed (Vincent Price), who is running his candidate Mayor Oakley (Hobart Cavanaugh) for re-election and pays white immigrants to vote in place of people who have died. Timothy ends up voting twenty-three times and earns a solid sum of $50. Rosie ends up getting lost in Tammany Hall and falls asleep in Tweed's office. Upon waking, she overhears Tweed discussing his plans to develop Central Park. To keep Rosie and her father on his side, Tweed asks Timothy to become Park Superintendent. Even though he has no qualifications, he heartily accepts. Meanwhile, John Matthews (Dick Haymes), a reporter for the *New York Times* who is investigating Tweed and his gang, has fallen for Rosie and tries to convince her that Tweed is a crook. She, however, is enjoying the upward mobility that Tweed provides. After all, he has arranged for her to audition with an opera company, after which he convinces its director to cast her in a production of *La traviata*. After John exposes Tweed's crimes—with Timothy's help—he and Rosie are together. It doesn't matter to Rosie that Tweed backed out of his promise to secure her an opera career, for both Timothy and John now promise to help her realize her dream.

From the 1840s to the 1890s, about 3.6 million Irish immigrants arrived in the United States. The influx started as a result of the Great Potato Famine (1845–1854), and those who came were mostly poor or unskilled workers. Entrenched white Americans, as Ibram X. Kendi describes it, "swung their rhetorical tools, long used to demean Blacks, and hit Irish immigrants, calling them 'white niggers.' "[9] While the lives of Irish immigrants were difficult, their presence also threatened the hold of free Blacks on service industry jobs in Northern cities, including New York. These racial tensions were among the factors that led to the 1863 New York City Draft Riots. In addition to the social stigma, the Irish immigrants were predominantly Catholic, which put them at odds with the mainstream Protestants. Historians Noel Ignatiev and David R. Roediger, among others, have discussed how the Irish used the Democratic Party (Tweed's party) and the Catholic Church in their successful efforts to become white.[10] Much of this activity took place in the antebellum period and shortly after the American Civil War, just before Rosie and Timothy arrive in New York.

While the use of accents in films can range anywhere from being a means of characterization to downright ludicrous and seemingly random, in *Up in Central Park* they are used to distinguish between two generations of immigrants in the same family. Timothy speaks with a strong Irish accent, while his daughter, who also has lived in Ireland her entire life, does not. They represent two different views of Irish immigrants: Timothy is the socially stigmatized Irishman of the early nineteenth century, a "harp," as one of Tweed's men calls him, while Rosie is the white Irish person who can perform the same airs and graces as a WASP.

Timothy's portrayal for much of the film comes as someone who is not that bright and can be easily manipulated, first to vote in the stead of dead people and second to naively accept the park superintendent post. Throughout the film, his accent limits his possibilities, and he never rises above the position Tweed gave him. But this can change. Timothy takes the opportunity to improve himself, to become white, by learning how to read. Since the film's action takes place before the 1917 Act and its requirement of a literacy test, Timothy is allowed to enter the United States. Once Timothy learns how to read, he becomes an ardent defender of white American ideals. He tries to tell his daughter the truth about Tweed, namely that he is greedy and does not abide by the tenets of the US Constitution. She eventually takes heed.

Rosie's lack of a pronounced Irish accent suggests that she had already become white before arriving in New York. Rosie can immediately enjoy white privilege, become upwardly mobile, and avoid the trappings of her father's Irishness. She can dress in nice clothes, aspire to a career as an opera singer, and marry John. Early in the film, her rendition of "Oh Say Can You See (What I See)" proves her ability to relate to the common person and her populist appeal. She thus displays what cinema audiences at the time would think of as genuine democratic qualities. But she also holds more sophisticated tastes. For her opera audition, she sings "Pace, pace mio Dio" (Peace, peace, my God) from Verdi's *La forza del destino* (The Force of Destiny). Rosie, as personified by Deanna Durbin (whose high-quality lyric soprano voice made her one of the most popular Hollywood singers of the 1940s), is shown to have exceptional ability as a performer, something that can help her find success—both onstage and off—in the United States.

*Viennese Nights* and *Up in Central Park* feature European immigrants who, because they have become white, hold an advantage in being able to succeed in the United States. Although Otto most likely never found any sort of happiness in his adopted homeland, a necessity of Hammerstein's heart-wrenching plot, Gus and Gretl certainly did. Then, even after Tweed seemed to dash Rosie's hopes for an operatic career, they did not die.

## THE GOOD NEIGHBOR POLICY: *SPRINGTIME IN THE ROCKIES* AND *THE GANG'S ALL HERE*

As part of the United States' efforts to combat communism and ensure that Latin American countries would not fall under communist rule, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt announced his "Good Neighbor Policy" in his March 4, 1933, inaugural address. During World War II, this anti-communist goal was extended to be also anti-Axis. The initiative promised non-intervention and non-interference in Latin American politics and focused on exchanges that promoted new economic initiatives and promised more positive depictions of Latin Americans in the United States. Hollywood of course would play a significant role in this endeavor. With the vibrant reputation of Latin American music and musical artists in the United States, film musicals became a natural forum for promoting Good Neighbor ideals.

When it comes to the Good Neighbor Policy and the Hollywood musical, the first image that often comes to mind is that of the flamboyant Carmen Miranda (1909–1955) and her colorful hats, especially those that featured various fruit-filled fantasies. Miranda became increasingly popular as a radio star and recording artist in Brazil during the 1930s before Broadway producer Lee Shubert heard her singing in a Rio de Janeiro club in 1939 and subsequently invited her to the United States. Miranda herself was an immigrant to Brazil, for she was born in Portugal and her family emigrated and settled in Rio when she was less than two years old. She made fourteen Hollywood films in which she established her exotic and iconic persona through not only colorful costuming but also evocative samba performances and distinctive malapropism-filled English. Miranda performed a particular and recognizable (to Brazilians) aspect of adapted culture, that of the *baiana*. A *baiana* is a woman from Bahia, one of the centers for the Brazilian slave trade, who almost always is either Black or of mixed race.[11] Miranda memorably played a *baiana* in the Brazilian carnival film *Banana da terra* (Banana of the Land, 1939, Sonofilmes), where she performed songs that commented on her character's sensuality and sexual appeal.[12] This was the image Miranda carried with her to Hollywood. Her appropriation of blackness, effected largely through open-midriff costumes (though covered for Hollywood), glamorous turbans, colossal jewelry, and high platform shoes, became the essence of a sensualized Brazilian-ness for North American audiences. According to Brazilian scholar Fernando Figueiredo Balieiro, she "made the Baiana [*sic*] a national symbol."[13]

Miranda's *baiana* image was not one that could be assimilated into a dominant white US culture. Although her appropriation of a Black identity in Brazil could nowadays be considered racist, as an emblem of Brazilian-ness in terms of being an immigrant to the United States, she is never asked to become white or expected to behave as white, though it is sometimes implied that her identity has been assimilated into whiteness. Miranda's characters, because of their heavily accented English, images as being somewhat scatterbrained, and willingness to expose their bodies, are almost inevitably seen as being inferior to the "sophisticated" white ones. These characters provide comic relief through their offstage behaviors, and while they are performing on stage, Miranda herself dazzles her fans, including those watching diegetically in the film itself as well as the targeted white male audiences sitting in movie theaters across the United States. As Shari Roberts asserts, Miranda "exaggerates signifiers of ethnicity and femininity" and her "appeal resides in the parody of . . . stereotypes."[14] These camp exaggerations provide unforgettable performances and emphasize Miranda's distinctive Otherness when it comes to white America.

Miranda performed these accentuated stereotypes when she appeared as first-generation immigrants Rosita Murphy in *Springtime in the Rockies* (1942, Twentieth Century–Fox, songs by Harry Warren and Mack Gordon, with Portuguese lyrics by Aloysio De Oliveira) and Dorita in *The Gang's All Here* (1943, Twentieth Century–Fox, songs by Leo Robin and Harry Warren). Other characters in both films view these women in racist terms by thinking that because of their distinctive dress and speech, Rosita and Dorita must lack the intellect and seriousness of purpose of white people. Rosita and Dorita become sexualized comics, immigrants who can evoke jealousy but will never pose any serious threat. Likewise, neither will they be able to find husbands in the United States—both women remain uncoupled at the end of their respective films. While the offstage personas of Rosita and Dorita invite individual racist commentary, their onstage performances endorse systemic racist ideas of segregation and assimilation through the lens of "white centering."

Layla F. Saad defines white centering as

> The centering of white people, white values, white norms, and white feelings over everything and everyone else. The belief, whether conscious or not, that whiteness is "normal" and BIPOC are "other."[15]

This is evident in the films' plot lines and especially in their music. Both movies feature big band swing numbers performed by two of the leading white bands of the time, Harry James and His Orchestra (billed as Harry James and His Music Makers) in *Springtime in the Rockies* and Benny Goodman and His Orchestra (billed as Benny Goodman and His Band) in *The Gang's All Here*. Pop ballads are also featured in both films. But it is the white swing style, itself an appropriation of African American music, that becomes established as the fundamental musical norm early on in both films. This white centering is apparent, for example, in the opening credits of *Springtime in the Rockies*, which features an instrumental version of the big band swing tune "I Had the Craziest Dream." The rich sounds of a lush Hollywood string section further emphasize the song's inherent whiteness.[16] This same swing style returns moments later in the film's first musical number, "Run, Little Raindrops, Run." Performed within the context of a Broadway show, the white stars, Vicki (Betty Grable) and Dan (John Payne), even wear white raincoats to accentuate what will be the film's unmistakable white centering. Similarly, the opening credits of *The Gang's All Here* feature swing renditions of the title song and "Paducah," a song that will carry significant implications in terms of race later in the film.

Miranda often performs against these manifestations of white musical centering with the Bando da Lua (Moon Gang), a sextet that came with her from Brazil. The Bando is almost always physically separated, or segregated, from the white big bands with whom they share the stage. Concerning assimilation, the white centering of the music—and therefore the films themselves—becomes vividly apparent at the end of certain songs and indeed at the end of both films. While the visual shots include Miranda and sometimes the Bando, the only sounds that are heard are those of the white big bands. The Latinx voice is literally silenced and the Brazilian performers' voices are assimilated into the white guise.

*Springtime in the Rockies* concerns the fictional Broadway team of Vicky Lane and Dan Christy. The two are in love, and Vicky is expecting an engagement ring from Dan. Dan, however, still enjoys the attention of the ladies. Vicky, who is becoming increasingly frustrated with Dan's womanizing, decides to return to her former partner in performance and romance, Victor Prince (Cesar Romero). Vicky and Victor, it emerges, are preparing a new show with Harry James and His Orchestra that will open at a swanky resort at Lake Louise in the Canadian Rockies. When Dan finds out, he travels to Lake Louise in order to win back Vicky. Along the way, he acquires a valet, the perennial student and bartender McTavish (Edward Everett Horton), and a secretary, the former Detroit airport gift shop employee Rosita Murphy (Miranda). In true Hollywood fashion, despite a series of mishaps, Vicky and Dan are together at the end.[17]

Rosita Murphy is extremely proud of her Brazilian heritage and appropriated *baiana* attire. Dan, however, is confused by her surname until Rosita explains the situation. Her father is Irish and her mother Brazilian, and she came to the United States two years earlier to find her father. This explains why she could have a job in a souvenir shop at the Detroit airport. Dan enjoys calling her "Murph," and in doing so, he attempts to make her more white—more Irish and less Brazilian—and therefore a greater source of jealousy for Vicky. Rosita doesn't reveal details about her life in the United States, except that she has six brothers (the Bando da Lua) whom Dan stopped to collect in St. Paul on their way to Lake Louise. Why the brothers live in St. Paul is never explained and only adds to the first-generation immigrant family's abstruseness.

In *The Gang's All Here*, the central story concerns Andy Mason (James Ellison), a soldier from a wealthy family who is unofficially engaged to the true girl next door, Vivian Potter (Sheila Ryan). When he spies Edie Allen (Alice Faye) in the chorus at the Club New Yorker, he is immediately smitten and flirts with her under the assumed identity of Sergeant Pat Casey. (He is afraid she may recognize his monied surname, hence the alias.) Andy is deployed to the South Pacific, and to celebrate his return, the Masons and the Potters plan a War Bond fundraiser at their estates that will feature the troupe of the Club New Yorker, which has conveniently been closed for two weeks. When Andy arrives home a decorated war hero, the love triangle erupts but is quickly resolved when Vivian tells Edie that she and Andy never loved each other. Furthermore, she's going to Broadway to perform with ballroom dancer Tony DeMarco (as himself).

Miranda plays Dorita, a performer at Club New Yorker, who is assumed to have moved to New York. Dorita has two notable interactions with men in the film. The first is with Phil Baker (as himself), the manager of the film's fictitious club. This is probably platonic, though the two are seen at one point returning from the horse races arm in arm. The second concerns the prudish Peyton Potter (Edward Everett Horton), whom she first meets at the Club New Yorker when she chooses him as an unwilling dance partner and a newspaper photographer snaps a picture of the two of them on the dance floor. Later in the film, when Peyton is telling Dorita the companies in which she should invest, she unexpectedly plants a kiss on his lips before doing so all over his face. Peyton becomes immediately entranced; Dorita's sexual charms have done their work. As a result of this encounter, Dorita may be recognizing her need to bridle her powerful sensuality through Potter's white Protestant morality, something she ends up doing by the end of the film.

Blossom Potter (Charlotte Greenwood), Peyton's wife, offers plenty of racist remarks about Dorita, indicating her own white fragility, to use Robin DiAngelo's term. When Dorita arrives to rehearse for the fundraiser, Blossom tells her guest, "Ah, I remember you from your pictures in the newspapers, or was it the police gazette?" Later, she tells Andy's dad, "That hat, I'll have to watch my bellcords and lampshades." Dorita's ethnicity, in Mrs. Potter's eyes, ties her to criminality. Her unsubstantiated accusations are based entirely on race.

Miranda, as Rosita or Dorita, performs her own Brazilian identity. Significantly, both of these women are Brazilian. In *Springtime in the Rockies*, Rosita overtly displays her Brazilian-ness in the feature "Tic Tac do Meu Coração" (My Heart's 'Tic-Tac,' by Alcyr Pires Vermelho and Walfrido Silva), which she performs at Lake Louise with the Bando da Lua, augmented by an unseen string section. The fast-paced delivery of the Portuguese text combined with Rosita's colorful white, aqua, and bronze attire and exuberant jewelry vividly accentuate her difference from the white raincoats of "Run, Little Raindrops, Run."

Dorita is a much larger role than Rosita. Carmen Miranda features prominently in *The Gang's All Here*'s two consecutive opening numbers, "Brasil" (music and Portuguese lyrics by Ary Barroso, English lyrics by Bob Russell) and "You Discover You're in New York." In the former, after a somewhat surreal opening featuring the dismembered head of Banda da Lua guitarist Aloysio de Oliveira, the SS *Brazil* docks, its passengers disembark, and its cargo, which includes bags of sugar and coffee, is unloaded, along with a huge fruit-filled net. Thanks to Hollywood technology, this net transforms into one of Miranda's lavish hats. As the film audience realizes that they are watching a staged diegetic musical number and not a purely cinematic sequence, Miranda herself is shown to be a Brazilian export.[18] After all, we have not yet met the character Dorita, so this is indeed Carmen Miranda as Carmen Miranda. She performs her quintessential samba accompanied by the Bando da Lua as the number segues, via an onstage (very white) marching band, into "You Discover You're in New York," still featuring Miranda and the Bando da Lua. Close-ups of members of the white female ensemble seated at tables, clad in black to distinguish them from Miranda, tell stories of New York. These narratives provide first impressions to a new immigrant arriving in the United States, not all that different dramaturgically from "Oh, Say Can You See (What I See)" in *Up in Central Park*. The sequence ends with host Phil Baker confirming what just transpired, "There's your good neighbor policy." South American commerce and culture have arrived in New York.

Immediately after these vivid performances featuring Miranda, the musical centering in *The Gang's All Here* returns to its white norm. The dancer Tony DeMarco performs a ballroom routine with an uncredited Virginia Wilson, after which the dance instructors choose members of the audience to join them for the rousing "The Uncle Samba" ("Digo o Ella" by Nestor Amaral, a member of Bando da Lua). In this telling sequence, a two-way melding of musical cultures takes place. White swing is Latinized while Latin music is whitened, though the white style remains dominant and therefore in control. This is one of those numbers at the end of which we see the Bando, an embodiment of physical Otherness for the white audience, but hear only the swing sounds of Benny Goodman, the normative whiteness.

Musical whiteness is further centered in the next musical sequence when Benny Goodman and His Band perform two hit parade-style swing numbers, "Minnie's in the Money" and Goodman's own "Soft Winds," at the Broadway Canteen, a popular hangout for soldiers. The association of white swing with the military in this World War II–era musical is especially significant here. Swing is being employed as an aural representation of the strength of the US military, and hence it promotes the dominance of US whiteness—musically and militarily—in the Western Hemisphere. This sense of power and control is an essential preamble for one of the most iconic of all Carmen Miranda sequences, "The Lady with the Tutti-Frutti Hat."

The banana-filled spectacle that crosses into phallic terrain most certainly promotes the stereotype of Latinx peoples as being oversexualized. Choreographed by Busby Berkeley (who also directed the film), "The Lady with the Tutti-Frutti Hat" reveals the essence of Dorita, who, as mentioned earlier, will eventually cover the unsuspecting Peyton Powell with kisses. After a spectacular cinematographic sweep of banana trees and sleeping bathing beauties, the star makes her grandiose entrance on a banana-filled cart, foreshadowing the sexualized images of the priapic-shaped fruit that dominate the lavish production number. The caprice reaches its climax in a classic Berkeley overhead shot with unmistakable sexual overtones. An outer circle of women inserts and removes their oversized banana props into similarly exaggerated strawberries maneuvered by two inner circles of women. All this takes place to a regular pulsating beat in what Alexander Doty calls "an all-woman group masturbation fantasy"[19] and Walter Aaron Clark describes as a "repeated simulation of coital penetration."[20] Brazilian censors cut the section when the film was shown there.[21] The number is a simplified samba, uncomplicated in its presentation. Clark asserts that the song's "virginal, child-like quality" plays into an image of Latin America as "a child who needs the guidance and tutelage of the Protestant, industrial, democratic northern hemisphere."[22] Dorita, as a new immigrant, needs white guidance to bridle her irrepressible sexuality.

Such guidance is represented musically in the film through white music. To regain white control after the exotic samba, Edie introduces her lyrical ballad "A Journey to a Star" within ninety seconds of Dorita's final chord. For the stereotyped hypersexual Latinx immigrant to live in the United States, according to the film's implied narrative, their drives had to be controlled. To demonstrate this musically in *The Gang's All Here*, the exuberance of the sexualized tutti-frutti hat had to be encased by the comparatively subdued establishment whiteness of Benny Goodman on one side and Alice Faye on the other.

Rosita and Dorita, as first-generation immigrants, both know the mainstream white music of the United States and can make it their own. Rosita demonstrates this in her first musical number in *Springtime in the Rockies*. Ostensibly arriving to take a letter from Dan as his secretary in the living area of his hotel suite, she appears for the first time in the film in *baiana* dress, much to her boss's surprise.[23] She surprises him even more when she brings in her six brothers (the Bando da Lua), who provide backup for her samba performance of the white pop standard "Chattanooga Choo Choo" in Portuguese. Rosita has been in the United States long enough to learn about white culture and can reinterpret it on her own terms. Dan seems perplexed (his normal response to many of Rosita's actions), for Rosita has transformed a property from his white identity—a song—into something wholly foreign to him not only in musical style but also in visual appearance. Her red, white, and green costume and swaying dance moves come from a world far removed from that of his tempered swing sounds and white raincoats.

Something similar, though on a larger scale and with telling nuances about whiteness, takes place in *The Gang's All Here* with "Paducah." The production number, which takes place during the War Bond fundraiser late in the film, begins with a visual endorsement of the event's white centeredness. An onscreen classical music trio of women playing violin, cello, and harp—dressed in white—establishes a formal atmosphere rooted in whiteness that, along with spectacularly colored fountains, indicates the wealth of the Masons and the Potters. When Benny Goodman and His Band begin the swing tune proper, this whiteness continues unabated, with Goodman playing clarinet on the first refrain and singing on the second. The lyric about Paducah, a small town in Kentucky at the confluence of the Tennessee and Ohio rivers, celebrates small-town, white America, even calling it "another name for Paradise." In other words, Paducah is a utopian embodiment of white America. The dominant soundscape and context thus established, Dorita enters to perform the song with Goodman's band in a fairly orthodox swing style, demonstrating her knowledge of US white musical norms. But when she moves to the side and performs it again, this time in her own samba style accompanied by the sequestered Bando da Lua (who are dressed in green, the background color on Brazil's flag), she effects the same sort of Latinized transformation that happened with "Chattanooga Choo Choo" in *Springtime in the Rockies.* When (white) ballroom dancer Tony DeMarco joins her for the next (instrumental) refrain, he is the obvious outsider. DeMarco, a consummate ballroom performer, seems visibly uneasy being so far out of his comfort zone. Whiteness returns at the end of the sequence as Goodman's band reasserts its presence and leads the final refrain, which again showcases the dancing of Miranda and a more assured DeMarco. This is a reprise of the aural-visual treatment from the end of "The Uncle Samba" earlier in the film, where the visual sphere that features Latin America plays against a purely white swing soundscape in which the voices of Latinx characters are silenced.

A return to literal white musical dominance quickly follows. Lush violins are heard as white women in classical white gowns appear on screen to introduce Edie singing a reprise of "A Journey to a Star," the same song that was used to re-establish whiteness after "The Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat." When DeMarco enters with Vivian in a stunning fountain-surrounded display of ballroom dance, his ease and comfort have clearly returned. He is home again in the world of white centeredness. This sequence leads into the "Polka Dot Polka," which again features Edie, now with a group of children. The polka is of eastern European origin, a geographic area whose immigrants to the United States had effectively become white earlier in the century. The polka, therefore, could be viewed as another dance that celebrates whiteness. Since children feature prominently, values associated with whiteness, through dance, are being taught to the next generation. The discrepancy between aural and visual images observed earlier in the film concerning samba and swing styles is reprised here, though now it is generational—adult voices are heard against visual images of children. The adult voices of the white establishment may be heard as silencing the (as yet unindoctrinated) voices of children, just as they do Miranda's distinctive persona.

The future is the focus of the film's final sequence, which opens with geometric images carried over from the end of "Polka Dot Polka" that become further abstracted against an aural background of lush string sounds and underlying Latin-infused rhythms. The female chorus, the same ensemble who carefully maneuvered bananas earlier in the film, are now dressed in ultramodern aqua blue jumpsuits with silver splashes. They have replaced their representative fruit with modernist rings of light and, later, colored discs. This finale could be read as some sort of whiteness in the distant future taming and controlling the sexualized images of the Other seen earlier in the film. Berkeley's choreography morphs into a kaleidoscopic fantasy that eventually features superimposed dismembered heads of the principal characters, including Benny Goodman, for a reprise of "A Journey to a Star." The imagery recalls the film's opening, though whiteness, not the Brazilian identity of Oliveira, is having the final word. Dorita becomes part of this somewhat bizarre vision; the only things that distinguish her visually are her turban and her earrings. While she has maintained these emblems of her individuality, she has otherwise been assimilated, as a first-generation immigrant, into a futuristic white US society. Her light skin tone is allowing her pass as white and therefore enjoy white privilege, something not possible for every Brazilian. Dorita's benign facial expression reveals that what Clark asserted about the lady with the tutti-frutti hat needing the "guidance and tutelage" of white society did indeed happen.

Whereas *The Gang's All Here* begins with the Good Neighbor Policy, *Springtime in the Rockies* ends with it. "Pan American Jubilee" functions as the film's denouement. Vicki and Dan, now reunited, are appearing in their new show for an adoring audience at Lake Louise. The number begins with the same type of musical whiteness with which the film opened. Vicki, in a white ball gown, and Dan, in a tuxedo, perform their characteristic whiteness in front of a blue curtain that the audience knows will eventually open to reveal a visually stunning set. Gordon's lyrics to Warren's syncopated tune include references to both the United States and Latin America that refer to and promote the Good Neighbor Policy. For the United States, there's mention of "Yankee Doodle" and the jitterbug, and for Latin America, the samba and the rhumba. These references remain in the abstract until the massive curtain opens, the percussion's role increases, and the dancing multilingual chorus performs on a large, glamorous set. The audience is taken from the white world of Vicki and Dan into the dazzling energy of Latin America. Many of the women are wearing large hats, moving the image of a *baiana* beyond Brazil to all of Latin America. Rosita enters, clad in white and dark pink and offering her Portuguese and subsequent English lyrics to the combined sounds of Bando da Lua and Harry James and His Orchestra. Her visual distinctiveness is accentuated by the men appearing behind her, whose white suits display the visual whiteness associated with Vicki and Dan's raincoats earlier in the film. Even though Otherness is present, it is being consumed and controlled in a white world, literally and figuratively. Victor, Vicki's former dance partner, joins Rosita to the strains of the combined musical ensembles before male dancers encircle them as Harry James's group overtakes the soundscape. When the dancers reverse, Vicki and Dan emerge, performing an energetic jitterbug, a dance with clear African American roots and another culturally appropriated emblem of whiteness. Since the end of the film is quickly approaching, other characters will take their turns in featured spots. McTavish and Vicki's friend Phoebe Gray (Charlotte Greenwood) offer a specialty comic dance to hints of a Latin beat before a trumpet-playing Harry James appears on screen to solidify the now-dominant swing aesthetic. This leads the final entrance of the five principals, Vicki and Dan on one side, McTavish and Phoebe on the other, and Rosita front and center, with James's swing being the sole occupant of the soundscape. Although Rosita and the chorus celebrate Latin America, it is the big band swing of Harry James and His Orchestra, the white-associated style from the beginning of the sequence, that exclusively occupies the sound world. For its US audiences, the musical style of "Pan-American Jubilee" implies the primacy of the United States in the Good Neighbor Policy and treats its Latin American aspects as either exotic (Rosita's language and her and the dancing chorus's costuming) or comic (McTavish and Phoebe's turn).

"Pan American Jubilee" and "Paducah" can be read as performing both segregation and assimilation. The Bando da Lua is physically removed from the white swing band in both numbers, emphasizing segregation. Regarding assimilation, the sound of the big band concludes both numbers, with Miranda's first-generation immigrant characters being visibly present but musically silent. Her voice, representing her identity, has been subsumed into whiteness. This follows the contemporary tenets of whites during World War II, who expanded the definition of whiteness to include Latinx peoples.[24] It also explains why, in *Springtime in the Rockies*, Cesar Romero, an actor of Cuban and Spanish heritage, appears as Victor Prince, a character whose ethnicity is never mentioned and is therefore made white by default. These musical sequences, as well as the casting of Romero, symbolize this racial shift, for they demonstrate how Latinx peoples, like the European immigrants discussed elsewhere in this chapter, could be whitened—here through music—and therefore, in the eyes and especially the ears of Hollywood, made US American.

## Biopics of (Whitened) European Immigrants: *The Great Caruso* and *Deep in My Heart*

The biopics *The Great Caruso* (1951, MGM) and *Deep in My Heart* (1954, MGM) tell the stories of European musicians who come to America and strive to bridge the cultural abyss between "high art" and popular appeal.[25] Enrico Caruso and Sigmund Romberg, in real life and on film, both wanted to relate to a broad audience and bring their art to a vast, democracy-loving, non-elitist America (like the fictional Rosie in *Up in Central Park*). In both films, the protagonists marry an American socialite, keeping the élan associated with wealth in America and making the famous musicians American, at least through marriage. (Caruso never became a US citizen, while Romberg became a naturalized citizen in 1919. Romberg's US citizenship process does not appear in *Deep in My Heart*.) More important, no mention is made of either man's previous relationships in Europe, neither Caruso's long-term involvement with singer Ada Giacchetti and their four children together, including Enrico Caruso Jr., nor Romberg's marriage to Eugenia Erb (which ended in divorce). For the sake of a Hollywood biopic, their American loves that cement their relationship with the United States, as played by starlets Ann Blyth (as Dorothy Caruso) and Doe Avedon (as Lillian Romberg), had to be their first serious romances.

Neither Caruso nor Romberg, like their filmic predecessors in *Viennese Nights* and *Up in Central Park*, were WASPs. They therefore had to become white. As Yang and Koshy relate, scholars such as David Barrett and David Roediger deduced that Italians (Caruso) were viewed around the turn of the twentieth century as "in-between peoples." Native-born white and older immigrants saw them as "above nonwhites (i.e., blacks and Asians) but below 'white' people."[26] Matthew Jacobson similarly identifies Jews (Romberg) as in-between, since they were cast at the time as "probationary whites" due to American anti-Semitism.[27] Caruso's Italian heritage is central to his film's narrative, whereas Romberg's Jewish heritage is erased in his tale, a direct result of anti-Semitism.

*The Great Caruso* starred Mario Lanza (1921–1959), a second-generation Italian immigrant from Philadelphia, as the world-renowned tenor. The plot is heavily fictionalized, so much so that the Caruso family successfully sued MGM for damages. Despite its inaccuracies, throughout the film Caruso's genuine desire to sing to the public is foregrounded. He is shown singing to the Gallery at the Met, the uppermost and cheapest seats, and not to the Golden Horseshoe, the domain of the wealthy patrons. Caruso does not "hold back" in order to curry favor from the Golden Horseshoe patrons and the critics, and instead offers exuberant performances for the masses. This love for the public is demonstrated when, after a performance of *La bohème* at the Met, he sings in the street for those who could not get into the opera.

In the film, Dorothy's father, Park Benjamin (Carl Benton Reid), and Giulio Gatti-Casazza (Eduard Franz), general manager at the Metropolitan Opera, are Caruso's biggest detractors. Caruso's father-in-law embodies an unchangeable elitism, telling the singer that quintessential American traits are "dignity, good taste, a sense of the fitness of things," all of which he sees missing in his son-in-law. At one point, Gatti-Casazza calls the valet "a stupid foreigner" because he likes Caruso. The Met director seems unaware that the valet was born in the United States, as the man retorts, and also seems to have forgotten that he himself was born in Italy!

The filmic Caruso has mixed feelings about the United States. After being called "bourgeois" in a series of bad reviews for early performances of *Aida*, he calls it "a cold country." Love changes this. He believes Dorothy when she tells him, "The only thing that matters in America is to be in love." (Echoes of *Up in Central Park* are evident here.) It is Dorothy who embodies the goodness of America, as well as the local Italian immigrant community, whose cultural home is the Ristorante Toscano. It is here that Enrico proposes to Dorothy and where she hosts a surprise birthday party for him during which she tells him she is expecting a baby. Restaurants are indeed public gathering places for many Italian immigrant communities, and the filmic Caruso endorses this trope. Then, as a concrete example of his love for his new country, Caruso includes "America" among his daughter's middle names. This is highlighted in the film, and is historically accurate, for his New York–born daughter was named Gloria Grazianna Victoria America Caruso (1919–1999).

Performing for a broad, democratic public and marrying a socialite, central characteristics of *The Great Caruso*, are also fundamental to *Deep in My Heart*, the highly fictionalized and whitened biopic of composer and pianist Sigmund Romberg. Romberg was born to a Jewish family in Nagykanizsa, Hungary, and spent his childhood in Belišće and his teenage years attending gymnasium (secondary school) in nearby Osijek, both of which nowadays are in Croatia. In *Deep in My Heart*, however, Romberg, as played by the Puerto Rican–born actor José Ferrer (1912–1992), becomes a native of Vienna and a graduate of the Vienna Conservatory, neither of which is accurate. His Jewish ethnicity is suppressed, and Romberg becomes, according to the character Mr. Barriston, "the schnitzel with the schmaltz." Later, the librettist Dorothy Donnelly, with whom Romberg collaborated on several musicals, calls him "a kid from Vienna."

While Caruso embraces the Ristorante Toscano, Romberg frequents the Café Vienna, run by Frau Anna Mueller (Helen Traubel). As she tells her guests early in the film, we must "remember where we were born" before giving a reverential rendition of "You Will Remember Vienna," the nostalgic waltz Romberg wrote for *Viennese Nights*.

The relationship between immigrants and broader issues of race is clearly evident in both films. As Kendi asserts, when describing the situation at the turn of the twentieth century, shortly before both Caruso and Romberg came to the United States:

> In this new America empire, American racist ideas went through what seemed very much like a revolving door, constantly going out into the colonizing world and then coming back into the country after conditioning the immigrant minds of the people arriving in the United States in the early 1900s. When Irish, Jewish, Italian, Asian, Chicana/o, and Latina/o people in America were called anti-Black racial epithets like "greasers" or "guineas" or "White niggers," some resisted and joined in solidarity with Black people. But most probably consumed the racist ideas, distancing themselves from Black people.[28]

Such distancing is evident in both films, heightened through a scene in each film in which the main character appears in racialized makeup. In the production of *Aida* at the Met early in the film, Caruso wears extremely heavy bronze makeup for the role of Radamès, the Egyptian Captain of the Guard. While this instance could be seen as following established practice at the time, it is not the case in *Deep in My Heart*. In an especially fictionalized scene, Romberg offers a one-man performance of the historically nonexistent show *Jazzadoo* in which he dons blackface makeup near the end of the routine. Here, the racist demeaning of African Americans is clearly on display, imagined and enacted by Romberg himself. In both instances, by performing a racialized Other, the protagonists, following Kendi's assertions, distance themselves from Black people and in doing so affirm their own whiteness. Such affirmations are critical to their abilities to succeed as first-generation immigrants in the United States.

## THE "MODEL MINORITY": *FLOWER DRUM SONG*

The film *Flower Drum Song* (1961, Universal) is a second-generation adaptation of C. Y. (Chin Yang) Lee's 1957 novel of the same name, its link being Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, and Herbert Fields's 1958 Broadway musical. The film, like its sources, concerns Chinese immigrants in post–World War II San Francisco. According to Robert G. Lee, "the film *Flower Drum Song* showed Asians in America as, if not yet a model minority, at least perfectly suitable candidates for ethnic assimilation."[29] Fields, who crafted the book for the Broadway version, wrote the screenplay, in which he changed the order of songs and, necessitated by the change of medium, made subtler aspects of the musical more explicit. In order to do this, he relied on Chinese stereotypes in terms of spoken phrases and visual images.[30] The film, more than the Broadway musical, became the means through which the work has become known. Revivals of the musical are few, and

David Henry Hwang's noteworthy yet commercially unsuccessful 2002 reworking has received only a handful of productions.[31]

As with nearly any portrayal of ethnic groups, *Flower Drum Song* has been called everything from outright racist to a "guilty pleasure for Asian Americans."[32] The film, the first musical to feature a nearly all-Asian cast telling a romantic story about Asian Americans, dealt directly with issues of assimilation among immigrants. In this regard, it occupies a significant place in Hollywood history.

The film reflected Pan-Asian casting. In this story of Chinese immigrants, most of the actors were not of Chinese ancestry. Miyoshi Umeki, a Japanese actress, played Mei Li, and the Korean-American actor Jack Soo played Sammy Fong. Nancy Kwan, of Scots-Irish and Chinese descent from Hong Kong, played Linda Low. James Shigeta, who played Wang Ta, was Japanese from Hawaii. Reiko Sato, who played Helen Chao, most likely a second-generation immigrant, herself was a second-generation immigrant, though from Japan and not China. Only Benson Fong, as the patriarch Wang Chi-Yang, was actually Chinese American.

Three non-Asian performers also feature prominently in the film. First is Juanita Hall (1901–1968), an African American singer and actor whose light skin tones allowed her to play characters of various ethnicities, including the Tonkinese Bloody Mary in *South Pacific* (1949, Broadway; 1958, film) and Madame Liang in *Flower Drum Song*. As with Bloody Mary, Hall played Madame Liang on Broadway and reprised the role in Hollywood. While Madame Liang could be seen as representing the integration of Chinese immigrants into US society, Hall's performance, as an African American, suggests the same ideas for African Americans, as Kathryn Edney asserts.[33] According to Edney, Hall, in playing Madame Liang, "did not perform blackness. She instead performed 'Americanness' that connected to, but did not explicitly highlight, Hall's own racial identity."[34] The second and third non-Asian performers, significantly, are heard and not seen. Operatic soprano Marilyn Horne provided Reiko Sato's singing voice in the soulful "Love, Look Away" while studio singer B. J. Baker did the same for Nancy Kwan in the ebullient (and problematic, especially from a gender perspective) "I Enjoy Being a Girl." In both instances, the vocal dubbing by white singers in two of the film's most memorable songs whitens the overall production in unseen and indeed hidden ways. Two of its immigrant characters are partially voiced by white singers, the effect of which is that these characters' own singing voices—something important in a musical—are superseded by whiteness.

In the story, Mei Li (Miyoshi Umeki) and her father, Dr. Han Li (Kam Tong), arrive as illegal immigrants in San Francisco, where Mei Li is supposed to enter an arranged marriage to Sammy Fong (Jack Soo), owner of the Celestial Gardens nightclub. Sammy, though, is involved with Linda Low (Nancy Kwan), the American-born lead showgirl at his club. Sammy introduces Mei Li to Madame Liang (Juanita Hall), sister-in-law of Master Wang Chi-Yang (Benson Fong), a very conservative older gentleman who does not want to give up Chinese ways or adopt American ones. Master Wang is concerned about his two sons. The older one, Wang Ta (James Shigeta), is about to graduate from university and plans to go to law school so that he can put off having to find a job for another three years. The younger son, Wang San (Patrick Adiarte), embraces all that America has to offer, including baseball and slang. Then there's the seamstress Helen Chao (Reiko Sato), who grew up in the United States and deeply loves Wang Ta, though he does not return her affection. (In the novel, the character on which Helen is based commits suicide, which does not happen in either the stage musical or the film.) Wang Ta and Mei Li fall in love, and in order to break her marriage contract with Sammy, Mei declares—at the wedding—that since she entered the United States illegally, the agreement is void. A double wedding quickly ensues. Wang Ta marries Mei Li, and Sammy is wed to Linda.

The history of Chinese immigration to the United States is fraught with racism. The Chinese Exclusion Act, which was in effect from 1882 to 1943, was the first law targeting a complete racial or ethnic group. With the Magnuson Act that succeeded it, a limit of 105 Chinese were allowed to enter the United States each year, and Chinese immigrants could apply for US citizenship for the first time. The subsequent Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, according to the Office of the Historian at the US Department of State, "created symbolic opportunities for Asian immigration, though in reality it continued to discriminate against them."[35] A new quota system was introduced based on race rather than nationality. To again quote the Office of the Historian, "Low quota numbers and a uniquely racial construction for how to apply them ensured that total Asian immigration after 1952 would remain very limited."[36] This is the world of *Flower Drum Song*. Lee's novel was published just five years after the 1952 Act, with both the musical and the film appearing within a decade. In Lee's novel, Mei Li and her father come to the United States legally under the sponsorship of a retired general; the creators of the show changed this aspect to set up a *deus ex machina* for a quick and happy ending to the story. Mei Li refers to the difficulties of the new immigration policy in the film when she says that it would take ten years to enter the country legally, and by then she would be too old.

Beyond issues of immigration itself, the film offers an overly simplistic generational view about immigrant assimilation—older generations resist it while younger ones embrace it. Wang Chi-Yang refuses to keep his money in a bank and wears traditional Chinese clothing at the same time that his sons want to be Americans. Wang Ta wears a tie and cardigan and respects his father, while Wang San really wants to be a white American kid who loves sports, rebels against his father, and ignores his Chinese heritage. He's a teenager, after all. These generational challenges are performed in the song "The Other Generation." Wang San's "American-ness" is aptly demonstrated in his jazz-inspired dance solo with saxophone and muted trumpets featured in the orchestration.

This modern-sounding sounding number (in 1961) showcases the ideology of modernism, in which, according to Robert G. Lee, assimilation becomes "the vehicle through which the social identities of race, class, sex, and nationality can be displaced by the individual embrace of the modern."[37] The film's overriding tone promotes assimilation and the embracing of white American norms. The implication is that white culture, with its modernity, is superior to the Chinese aesthetics that Wang Chi-Yang defends. The younger generation, according to the film's narrative, takes on this racist notion and thinks they can improve themselves by acting white and that their Chinese heritage will deter their opportunities.

The Chinese immigrants in *Flower Drum Song* also create their own identities. Wang Ta sees himself as someone who can be both Chinese and American. He tells Linda Low that his father is "completely Chinese" while his young brother is "completely American." "I'm both," he says. Madame Liang, the sister of Wang Chi-Yang's deceased wife, also claims a new dual identity. She is of an older generation and yet has completed five years of classes to become a US citizen. She mediates between the two generations in the Wang family by trying to get her brother-in-law to keep his money safely in a bank while at the same time encouraging her nephews to be proud of their Chinese heritage. In her song "Chop Suey," which she performs at a party celebrating her completion of citizenship classes and Wang Ta's graduation, she performs this fabricated identity. Like the dish chop suey, which was invented in San Francisco, she sees herself as a product of Chinese and American cultures. Multiple references to 1950s popular culture pepper the lyrics, including Sandra Dee, ballpoint pens, and Perry Como, and the dances showcase a variety of styles, including a square dance, the quintessential emblem of rural white America at the time; a waltz, a well-known white ballroom dance; and the jitterbug. The number ends with polite bows, evoking the decorum of Chinese traditional culture. By including textual references to popular culture and emphasizing dances associated with white America, the number reflects the film's assimilationist agenda, which according to Lee, "erases from memory the history of the Chinese in America as a racialized minority" and shows the "inventedness of ethnic identity."[38]

In the film, it is not only Madame Liang but all the women of Chinese heritage who are shown to be more adept at adopting American ways than the men. The US-born Linda tells of her American values in the perky number she sings to herself, "I Enjoy Being a Girl." To Linda, being American means to love consumer culture and buy expensive things. She also dreams of being an idealized white American wife and mother in "Sunday," during which she envisions what Lee calls "the luxuries of middle-class life, including children playing cowboys and Indians."[39] Mei Li possesses a great deal of agency, for she brings her father with her to find the man she is supposed to marry, demands that he marry her, and then breaks off the wedding so she can be with Wang Ta, whom she really loves. Mei Li watches television to learn about being an American and especially about American pragmatism. When she sees a program in which a Mexican woman in the United States uses her illegal status as a reason not to marry a man in love with someone else, Mei Li realizes that she too can use this logic to break her own marriage contract, which she does.

The film's assimilationist narrative is echoed in several musical numbers. The music underscoring the opening credits, played against a sequence of watercolors depicting Mei Li and her father's journey from Hong Kong to San Francisco, is one such example. The score begins with repeated staccato notes, a long-held Western moniker of Asian musics, before moving to the heavily punctuated refrain of "A Hundred Million Miracles." As the titles progress, the orchestral string section becomes more prominent and offers lush legato statements of "Love Look Away" and "You Are Beautiful," two songs written in the highly recognizable midcentury melody-driven Broadway style. These songs contrast significantly with the clipped articulations of "A Hundred Million Miracles." The musical norms of white Broadway supplant those of a created Southeast Asia.

A further example of musically identifiable assimilation is present in the song "A Hundred Million Miracles." Although certainly problematic in its cliché-ridden Orientalist ethos, the song's appearances at both ends of the film accentuate the plot's assimilationist dimensions. As the first song in the film,[40] Mei Li performs it wearing a traditional blue tunic to the accompaniment of her flower drum. Chinese Americans in Western attire watch as she sings in a concrete-filled (e.g., modern) public space in Chinatown. The song's refrain, sung to the title words, is set to eight equally timed staccato notes, a clearly identifiable Orientalist musical identifier, followed immediately by a related pattern on the flower drum. The sequence repeats twice before the appearance of the concluding and contrasting legato line, "are happening every day." The refrain returns at the end of the film's double wedding. But now, when Mei-Li intones the opening, her singing is decidedly more legato, with a hint of rubato. The nearly martial staccato notes have been excised from the soundscape; in other words, the song has become less "Chinese" and more "Broadway." Linda then intones the phrase in the same style, as does the chorus before moving on to the fourth and final line. The song, like its singers, has become whitened. To emphasize this transformation, an instrumental statement of the original staccato version accompanies the final watercolor image, which shows both couples with babies. The visual style, like the reprise of the song, hearkens back to the beginning of the tale.

## ASSIMILATED IMMIGRANT HARMONY: THE *PITCH PERFECT* SERIES

The tropes of easily accepted white immigrants, musically gifted Latinx characters, and assimilated Asians coalesce in the *Pitch Perfect* series (2012, 2015, 2017, Universal). The trilogy centers on the onstage and offstage lives of the Bellas, a female a cappella group from Barden University, which appears to be a private liberal arts institution located in the Southern United States. (The campus sequences were filmed at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.) Barden has a beautifully landscaped campus, and in scenes depicted campus life, only a handful of students of color are shown among the largely white student population.

In the inaugural offering, *Pitch Perfect*, a new core of first-year students join the established—and establishment—group. Among them are Beca (Anna Kendrick), who dreams of being a music producer and whose father is on the Barden faculty, and the Australian international student "Fat Amy" (Rebel Wilson), who shows no self-control in speaking whatever is on her mind. *Pitch Perfect 2* takes place three years later, when Beca and Amy are seniors and the Bellas have won the ICCA (International Championship of Collegiate A Cappella) three years running. *Pitch Perfect 3* is set another three years later, after the core team have all graduated, except for Emily Junk (Hailee Steinfeld), who joins the Bellas in *Pitch Perfect 2*. The now twenty-somethings reunite for a USO tour in Europe.

The Bellas of *Pitch Perfect* are almost entirely white. In the first film, the group includes two token women of color, Lilly Onakuramara (Hana Mae Lee), who is Asian; and Cynthia Rose Adams (Ester Dean), the group's sole African American. Even with Lilly and Cynthia Rose among its members, the group's incarnation in the first film is more diverse than that of the previous year, featured in the opening scene, when the Bellas are entirely white. A third woman of color, Flo Fuentes (Chrissie Fit), joins the group in the second film.

As is typical at universities in the United States, Barden draws students from other countries. International students become Bellas over the course of the series. Flo comes from Guatemala, and Patricia Hobart, aka "Fat Amy," proudly hails from Australia. She describes herself as "the best singer in Tasmania, with a T." It is unclear whether Lilly is an international student, since this is but one aspect of her mysterious identity.

Racist caricatures and stereotypes of Asian and Latinx characters are woven into the series. Lilly is a quiet Asian woman who never speaks above a whisper. She performs her racially expected talents concerning technology through her role as the Bella's human beatbox. Likewise troubling are Beca's interactions with her Korean American roommate, Kimmy Jin (Jinhee Joung), in the first film. When they first meet, Beca says to Kimmy, "No English? Yes English? Just tell me where you're at with English." Kimmy's attitude toward her white roommate shows either cold indifference, as in when she returns to the room with two friends and remarks, "The white girl is back," or open hostility, when the Bellas are waiting for Beca to return after her arrest following an incident at the regional competition. But when Kimmy visits the Korean American Student Association tent early in the film, she is smiling and laughing. Beca's discriminatory remarks to Kimmy are painted as a major reason for her anti-white attitude.

When Flo is introduced in *Pitch Perfect 2*, she embodies negative Latinx stereotypes of a large family who live in poor sanitary conditions. Her fatalistic attitude manifests itself in remarks such as when she tells the Bellas that she "had diarrhea for seven years" before coming to Barden. Flo lives in fear of being deported after the Bellas are disqualified from competition, dreading that "there's a chance I will be deported. I will try to re-enter the country, and I will probably die at sea."

Just as Blossom Potter provided racist remarks in *The Gang's All Here*, ICCA commentator John Smith (John Michael Higgins) offers similar utterances in the *Pitch Perfect* series, often to the dismay of his co-host, Gail Abernathy-McKadden-Feinberger (Elizabeth Banks). For example, in *Pitch Perfect 2*, he says, in regards to Flo, "She may have to do that backflip right back over the fence into Mexico." After Gail tells him she's Guatemalan, he retorts, "Oh, none of that matters." John seems blissfully oblivious to his racism. His overtness, though, might make audience members take stock of their own inadvertent public displays of racism.

In the post-graduation world of *Pitch Perfect 3*, the jobs held by immigrant members of the Bellas are similarly telling. Flo works at a juice truck and is heard giving a woman her drink "with a shot of white privilege," while Lilly is shown doing extremely meticulous work threading a needle. Racist stereotypes of Latinx immigrants working in the concession industry and Asian immigrants as seamstresses are proffered here. Fat Amy, who is white, instead gets to perform her raunchy one-woman show, "Fat Amy Winehouse." White immigrants achieve their dreams, while the women of color work service industry jobs, even with a private liberal arts education . . . or so it seems.

Assumptions about Flo and Lilly are thwarted in *Pitch Perfect 3*. This occurs first in a fast sequence showing passports as the Bellas prepare to travel to Europe and again at the end of the film, where confessions are made. Thanks to the ability to pause a DVD, it is possible to read details on the passports. Flo is indeed a Guatemalan citizen, but was born in Miami. Under the Fourteenth Amendment, as a person born in the United States, Flo has US citizenship. Why she is traveling on a Guatemalan passport remains a mystery, but no more so than the case of Lilly, who it turns out is a US citizen and was born in Nevada's Area 51. At the end of the film, Flo tells her surprised friends that she actually owns the juice truck and is getting ready to franchise her business. She has become a successful US entrepreneur. Lilly, in a somewhat bizarre twist, begins to speak at a normal volume, surprising everybody, and tells them that her name is really Esther and that "Satan has finally left my body."

Fat Amy consistently exudes her whiteness. She describes the Bellas in *Pitch Perfect 2* as "ethnically diverse" in an acknowledgment of its few (e.g., token) women of color, and also remarks that people will ask about the team representing the United States, "Why is the most talented one Australian?" It turns out at the end of *Pitch Perfect 3* that Amy's mother provided her with a $180 million trust, which will allow Amy to continue her Fat Amy Winehouse series. Her whiteness becomes coupled with financial privilege.

* * *

As this essay has demonstrated, Hollywood musicals from 1930 to 2017 provide material advantages to first-generation immigrants who either are white or have become white. These depictions sanction the concept of whiteness by relegating other ethnicities, specifically Brazilian, Chinese, and Guatemalan, to secondary status. They thus reflect a verisimilitude on the part of Hollywood musical creators when depicting whiteness on screen. Stereotypes are replicated, caricatures are performed, and whiteness is affirmed. Sometimes the actors themselves become inextricably connected to the immigrant characters they play, such as Carmen Miranda, while others invite more nuanced conversations, as in the case of Juanita Hall. As products of a self-defined "nation of immigrants," these films can help illuminate the historical shifts in US history concerning immigration and their ongoing relationship to whiteness. As we challenge racist practices of assimilation and segregation (both of which appear in films discussed here) by dismantling a value hierarchy of cultures, insights gained from interrogating white-produced cultural artifacts, including film musicals, can help us move toward a more just and anti-racist society.

## NOTES

1. Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 25.
2. Philip Q. Wang and Kavitha Koshy, "The 'Becoming White Thesis' Revisited," *Journal of Public and Professional Sociology* 8, no. 1 (2016): 3, available at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jpps/vol8/iss1/1. In their article, the authors discuss various usages of the term, including race-based ones, and how these have been applied in scholarship.
3. "The Immigration Act of 1924 (The Johnson-Reed Act)," Office of the Historian, US Department of State, accessed January 4, 2020, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act.
4. Yang and Koshy, "The 'Becoming White Thesis' Revisited," 14.
5. For more on *Viennese Nights*, see William A. Everett, *Sigmund Romberg* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 247–248, and "Emulating Broadway in Early Film Operetta: The Romance of Romberg and Hammerstein's *Viennese Nights* (1930)," in *Musicology without Frontiers: Essays in Honour of Stanislav Tuksar*, ed. Ivano Cavallini and Harry White (Zagreb: Croatian Musicological Society, 2010), 443–459. For more on the film version of *Up in Central Park*, see Everett, *Sigmund Romberg*, 272–273.
6. This narrative device also occurs in *Maytime* (1917), Romberg's highly successful operettas with librettist and lyricist Rida Johnson Young. *Maytime* was turned into a MGM movie musical in 1937 starring Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy, with a wholly different plot from the original and an almost entirely new score.
7. Dorothy Fields and Herbert Fields were siblings.
8. For more on the stage version of *Up in Central Park*, see Everett, *Sigmund Romberg*, 232–240.
9. Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2016), 170.
10. Yang and Koshy, "The 'Becoming White Thesis' Revisited," 15. See Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), and David R. Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
11. James Mandrell, "Carmen Miranda Betwixt and Between, or, Neither Here nor There," *Latin American Literary Review* 29, no. 57 (January–June 2001): 27.
12. Mandrell, "Carmen Miranda Betwixt and Between," 28.
13. Fernando Figueiredo Balieiro, "Consuming Carmen Miranda: Dislocations and Dissonances in the Reception of an Icon," *Estudos feministas* 25, no. 1 (January–April 2017): 275. He states earlier on the same page, "Carmen's whitened Baiana, alluding to negritude and to the popular, represented the possibility to reconcile the promises of racial harmony with national unity, without breaking with whiteness."
14. Shari Roberts, "'The Lady in the Tutti Frutti Hat': Carmen Miranda, a Spectacle of Ethnicity," *Cinema Journal* 32, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 14.
15. Layla F. Saad, *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ambassador* (Naperville, IL: Source Books, 2020), 229.
16. The full orchestral string-dominated sound typified the soundscape of the lavish white-centered films popular at the time, such as *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and *Gone with the Wind* (1939).
17. According to Alex Bádue, "The title *Springtime in the Rockies* was translated to *Minha Secretária Brasileira* for Brazilian audiences, which translates to 'My Brazilian Secretary' and shifts the focus from the main couple to Miranda. . . . [T]here is also the fact that the

title *Springtime in the Rockies* literally translated to Portuguese would not mean much to Brazilians" (email to author, January 19, 2021).

18. Mandrell, "Carmen Miranda Betwixt and Between," 29.
19. Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 13; quoted in Mandrell, "Carmen Miranda Betwixt and Between," 34.
20. Walter Aaron Clark, "Doing the Samba on Sunset Boulevard: Carmen Miranda and the Hollywoodization of Latin American Music," in *From Tejano to Tango: Essays on Latin American Popular Music*, ed. Walter Aaron Clark (New York: Routledge, 2013), 260.
21. Clark, "Doing the Samba on Sunset Boulevard," 260.
22. Clark, "Doing the Samba on Sunset Boulevard," 262.
23. According to Alex Bádue, "Miranda's stylized version of a baiana here is taken to new heights. This outfit exemplifies how much Hollywood costume designers loved creating dresses and hats for Miranda, to the point that they just complicate the image of Brazilians and Latin Americans. Miranda's dresses in later films, especially after she left Twentieth Century–Fox, were even farther from any identification with baianas (or Brazilians)" (email to author, January 19, 2021).
24. Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2010), 359.
25. Another biopic of a European immigrant musician, *The Jolson Story* (1946), presents the story of Lithuanian-born Al Jolson (Asa Yoelson, 1886–1950). The film begins with a young Yoelson living in Washington, DC, with his parents. No direct mention is made of his family's immigration story. One obtuse reference to Jolson's naturalized status appears late in the film, when Jolson and his wife Julie Beason (based on Ruby Keeler) contemplate a film together. Jolson's manager, Steve Martin, tells the star, "You can say no, too, you're a citizen." Larry Parks, who plays Jolson, appears in blackface in the film, echoing the racialized makeup seen in *The Great Caruso* and *Deep in My Heart*.
26. Yang and Koshy, "The 'Becoming White Thesis' Revisited," 18. See David Barrett and David Roediger, "In-Between Peoples: Race, Nationality, and the New Immigrant Working Class," *American Journal of Ethnic History* 16, no. 3 (1977): 3–44.
27. Yang and Koshy, 'The 'Becoming White Thesis' Revisited," 17. See Matthew F. Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
28. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 285–86.
29. Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 172.
30. For example, "You Are Beautiful" and "Don't Marry Me," both of which occur in Act 1, are heard much later in the film. Conversely, "The Other Generation" appears much earlier in the film than in the stage version. See also James Deaville, "The Many Lives of *Flower Drum* Song (1957–2002): Negotiating Chinese American Identity in Print, on Stage, and on Screen," in *China and the West: Music, Representation, and Reception*, ed. Yung Hon-Lun and Michael Saffle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 127.
31. Hwang's version is published as Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein II, and David Henry Hwang, *Flower Drum Song* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003).
32. Melissa Hung, "Six Decades Ago, 'Flower Drum Song' Featured Hollywood's First Asian-American Cast," nbcnews.com, August 13, 2018, accessed November 18, 2019, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/six-decades-ago-flower-drum-song-featured-hollyw

ood-s-first-n899576. For more on the differing views of *Flower Drum Song*, see David H. Lewis, *Flower Drum Songs* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 127–128.

33. Kathryn Edney, "'Integration through the Back Door': African Americans Respond to *Flower Drum Song* (1958)," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 4, no. 3 (2010): 262–272, especially 269–270.
34. Edney, "'Integration through the Back Door,'" 268.
35. "The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (The McCarran-Walter Act)," Office of the Historian, US Department of State, accessed January 3, 2020, https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/immigration-act.
36. "The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952."
37. Lee, *Orientals*, 179.
38. Lee, *Orientals*, 175.
39. Lee, *Orientals*, 176.
40. This is not the case in the stage version.

# CHAPTER 8

# "CUBANENIC, CARABENIC, CASTALENIC, HARLEMENIC"

## *Reclaiming Blackness in Lena Horne's Film Musicals*

HANNAH ROBBINS

> I want to thank all of the shoulders of the strong and brave and courageous women that I am standing on. I am standing on Lena, Lena Horne's shoulders. I am standing on Maya Angelou's shoulders. I'm standing on Diahann Carroll and Ruby Dee and most of all, Billie Holiday.
>
> —Audra McDonald[1]

When musical theater star Audra McDonald collected her record-breaking sixth Tony Award for her performance as Billie Holiday in *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill*, she closed her acceptance speech by acknowledging the Black women who had made her career possible. At the start of her list was African American singer, film star, and activist Lena Horne. Coincidentally, a friend and performing companion of the real Billie Holiday, Horne began her career as a chorus girl in Harlem before enjoying success as a singer and then breaking boundaries in 1942 as the first Black person to secure a multifilm contract in Hollywood.[2] Horne is perhaps best known for her appearances in the films *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), *Stormy Weather* (1943), and, much later, as Glinda the Good Witch in *The Wiz* (1978). However, she was also a prolific solo artist, embarking on many tours, releasing records across several decades, and finally, receiving a Special Tony Award for her one-woman show *Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music* in 1981. This chapter focuses on how Horne's identity has been read and can be interpreted through her film performances.[3]

As a teenager, Horne took financial responsibility for her parents in New York when she joined the Cotton Club chorus in 1933.[4] She toured and recorded with Noble Sissle (*Shuffle Along* [1921]) and his orchestra, becoming one of the first Black women to conduct a touring band when Sissle was taken ill.[5] Horne later found popularity as a headline artist at Café Society Downtown in Greenwich Village where she sang with renowned composer, pianist, and band leader Duke Ellington, pianist and singer Hazel Scott, and the aforementioned Holiday. Horne's agent Harold Gumm suggested she travel to Los Angeles as a star singer and headline at the opening of a new nightclub, Trocadero.[6] Horne was uncertain about the move but was encouraged by the idea of performing again with Duke Ellington's band, Katherine Dunham and her dancers, and with established singer and actor Ethel Waters.[7] Her decision was influenced by her friend, the singer and activist Paul Robeson, and by Walter White, leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).[8] They convinced her that this would be an "excellent opportunity" for her. In her autobiography, Horne explains: "it was never openly expressed to me, but I think they felt a pretty Negro woman might be an interesting weapon to try on the moguls."[9]

Although World War II interrupted the building of the club, Horne went and performed at a smaller venue known as the Little Troc. The venue became "that year's 'in' place for the Hollywood crowd," with figures like Marlene Dietrich, Artie Shaw, and Lana Turner in the audience.[10] While Horne was subjected to racial abuse including rumors about hating white men "just like Billie Holiday" and being refused entry to local restaurants, her performances also gained widespread popularity.[11] For example, Cole Porter invited her to one of his Hollywood parties. Horne explains: "Nothing was said about money, but it was understood that I would sing for my supper."[12] Horne recognized that she was already being treated as a spectacle, even by figures like Porter who would subsequently welcome her as a real guest in his Hollywood circle. However, Robeson and White had predicted her appeal correctly. Horne was quickly spotted by Universal Studios, who screen-tested her in January 1942, and was then hired by MGM.

Horne's screen career began with relatively substantial roles in film musicals with "all African American" casts. (This racial delineation applies exclusively to the acting talent and not the films' production teams.) She first appeared in *The Duke Is Tops* (1938), produced by the independent Black-owned studio Million Dollar Pictures.[13] Horne then took a major role in MGM's film adaptation of the Broadway musical *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), and was lent to Twentieth Century–Fox to star in *Stormy Weather* (1943). In both *The Duke Is Tops* and *Stormy Weather*, Horne demonstrated her ability to portray familiar "star-in-the-making" characters. Indeed, her roles in all three of these films show how Horne was able to conceptualize a successful career at MGM, with leading, dramatic parts clearly in her range.

In her autobiography *Lena*, Horne describes her fear that the studio might use breaks in her filming schedule to cast her in stereotypical roles offered to Black women. She explains how she was bolstered by her political allies to attempt something new:

> Walter [White]'s concern, and mine too, was that in the period while I was waiting for *Cabin in the Sky* they would force me to play roles as a maid or maybe even as some jungle type. Now these were the roles, as I have said, that most Negroes were forced to play in the movies at that time. It wasn't that I felt I was too good or too proud to play them but Walter felt, and I agreed with him, that since I had no history

> in the movies and therefore had not been typecast as anything so far, it would be essential for me to try to establish a different kind of image for Negro women.[14]

Despite this ambition, the size and significance of Horne's roles in multiracial casts decreased after her two hits—*Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather*—in 1943. Horne recalled that the studio became "afraid of what they called 'my attitude,'" as she insisted that the terms of her contract, including using room service, front doors at hotels, and swimming pools, were always met.[15] She felt the industry resisting the possibility that other Black actors would begin a "large-scale campaign . . . to raise their status" and the diversity of roles available to them.[16]

Tragically, Horne herself was unable to achieve the aims she was criticized for establishing. The Motion Picture Production Code, introduced in 1934, "strictly enforced issues pertaining to sex and sometimes to race."[17] Sean Griffin describes how the Production Code Administrators worried that scenes including African American actors might be provocative, implicitly encouraging interracial mixing and miscegenation.[18] Therefore, these regulations prohibited Horne, as a Black woman, from taking on romantic or familial roles in musicals that also featured white actors:

> I sang in a number that could be separated from the rest of the picture and cut very easily. Because during the forties and fifties, some places in the south and in certain countries like South Africa they wouldn't show a black on the screen with somebody else.[19]

While Horne made almost the same number of films as peers like Kathryn Grayson, who appeared with her in *Thousands Cheer* (1943), and *Till the Clouds Roll By* (1946), or Ann Miller (*Easter Parade*, *On the Town* [1949], *Kiss Me Kate* [1953]), Horne's performances were easily removed when films were distributed to more conservative areas. In this way, Horne's success and stardom were always partially limited. Throughout the rest of the 1940s, she was perpetually distanced from the action as well as the musical drama of the films she appeared in.

In addition to having her career dictated by the terms of the Motion Picture Production Code, Horne's connections, including financial donations, to the Black civil rights organization the NAACP hindered her career. During America's involvement in World War II, Horne challenged the "niceties of segregation" while on United Service Organizations (USO) entertainment tours to support the troops.[20] She demanded that Black soldiers be mixed with white, and they come forward from behind the prisoners of war. According to her biographer Leslie Palmer, "[Horne's] work on the Council of African Affairs[21] and her support of the liberal Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences and Professions, for whom she did countless benefit performances, also made her a ready target."[22] These associations led her to be labeled a "communist sympathizer" in *Red Channels* and *Counterattack* in 1950 when she refused to testify against Robeson.[23] Yet through her recording career and television performances, Horne was able to salvage her reputation. She returned fleetingly to screen musicals in 1956 (with *Meet Me in Las*

*Vegas*) and then, in 1958, she became the first African American woman to be nominated for the Tony Award for Best Actress in a Musical for her performance in Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg's Broadway musical *Jamaica.*[24] She next returned to sing on film in Sidney Lumet's screen adaptation of *The Wiz* in 1978.[25]

African American film historian Donald Bogle describes how Horne "gave a generation of moviegoers a new and potent symbol," enabling careers for other Black stars like Hazel Scott and choreographer/dancer Katherine Dunham in the 1940s and the "great dramatic stars of the 1950s," Dorothy Dandridge and Sidney Poitier.[26] However, Horne maintained throughout her life that she had not especially wanted to become a film star—"I didn't want to be in the movies. I didn't like most of the roles that Afro-Americans played in the movies at that time"—and that she attempted to leave Hollywood after returning to New York and working with Count Basie.[27] She describes pressure from the NAACP and Urban League to stay in the films because she had been given an opportunity not afforded to many.[28]

The first part of this chapter engages with narratives that frame Horne as what Malcolm X called a "token-integrated Negro."[29] I consider how Horne has been perceived as an ambassador and model for African American conduct while her Blackness has been continually scrutinized. In the first section, I explore the intersectionality of this evaluation of her racial identity and issues of colorism with the undiscussed violence of repeatedly questioning Horne's heritage, her experience as an isolated Black woman in her film career, and the apparent cost to her mental health and self-concept this caused despite being a prolific activist. Having established this collision between aspects of Horne's public persona, I make the case that Horne was increasingly marginalized and exoticized in films with multiracial casts. I revisit Horne's screen performances, recognizing the pressures she faced and the racial coding found in many interpretations of her life and career. By covering topics associated with the objectification and othering of Blackness, I argue that Horne's legacy has been shaped by little-recognized forms of structural racism. I suggest that Horne has been presented as a limited and problematic presence in African American liberation rather than as an isolated outsider who was not only the first but also and increasingly "the only" Black woman in her sphere. As part of addressing this discourse, I address why we return to her performances in *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* and close by highlighting how her appearance in the film adaptation of *The Wiz* speaks to an alternative narrative of stardom to which we have failed to do full justice.

## The Bronze Goddess

"Amid the call for image changes and better roles for African Americans, Lena Horne arrived at the perfect time: perfect for her, perfect for the movie industry, and perfect for the nation."[30] Bogle describes Horne's timely appearance in Los Angeles when film executives were willing to consider a slightly different representation of Black womanhood on screen. Yet scholars and journalists have repeatedly questioned if Horne truly embodied Blackness. Editorial pieces as late as 1972 highlight how Horne's legacy is presented through this discussion. For example, an article about Horne in *American Vogue* begins: "Of course, in the early days, the public felt she was not *really* Black. Her face, with its incandescent light skin, its perfect film-star features, barely hinted at the stereotypes of her race. And how she sang! And how she moved!"[31] In this commentary, John Gruen accidently highlights the perpetual scrutiny of Horne's body. Does she have "phenotypic" Black features? Are her cheekbones too high? Is her nose the wrong shape? Is her skin too "coppery"?

Black feminist bell hooks explains this quest to qualify Horne's Blackness in her book *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*: "When black women actresses like Lena Horne appeared in mainstream cinema most white viewers were not aware they were looking at a black female unless the film was specifically coded as being about blacks."[32] Meanwhile, film scholar Richard Dyer begins his chapter on Horne's screen performances by qualifying her racial identity: "a colored star who could but insistently did not pass for white."[33] He continues:

> No matter what she looked like, what she was was coloured. . . . Despite her appearance and despite the complexity of her ancestry, Lena Horne was, in the two politically correct terms of the period, coloured, a Negro. Moreover, she insisted on this politically and culturally.[34]

Where hooks frames Horne's supposed "passing" as white in the context of white spectatorship, Dyer questions the validity of Horne's Blackness itself. The use of language is of vital importance here. In his summary quoted above, he repeats "despite" twice, suggesting Horne was ignoring the truth of her appearance and complex heritage while also noting her "insistence" (also used twice in the quotes above alone) that she be "understood" as Black. In this introduction, Dyer represents Horne's Blackness as a mask for an undefined Otherness rather than recognizing the multiplicity of African American identities in the context of transatlantic slavery and historical atrocities against indigenous communities.

Violent interrogation of Horne's racial identity began at birth when nurses paraded her around the Jewish hospital in Brooklyn when she was born to show off her "beautiful copper hue."[35] In her first screen role in *The Duke Is Top*s, Horne's complexion (hardly translated on black-and-white film) is highlighted when a fake headline from *Variety* covers the screen saying: "Bronze Nightingale Wows Blase Broadway Producer: Ethel Andrews signs for Century Club Appearance."[36] Following her success in *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather*, *The Duke Is Tops* was reissued in cinemas under the new title *The Bronze Venus* in 1943. Lobby cards promoting *The Bronze Venus* reuse press photos from the 1938 release but center Horne as the star of the film, rather than a supporting actor, while foregrounding the color of her skin.[37] Soon after, *Time* magazine described Horne as the "Chocolate Cream Chanteuse"—a "milk-chocolate-colored Brooklyn girl"—in coverage of her 1943 appearance at the Savoy-Plaza Café Lounge in

New York.[38] Later, publications would remark on how she made Blackness appealing to white audiences. For example, *Jet* magazine reported: "When her movies played in Sweden, beautiful blondes rushed out to buy the darkest make-up they could find."[39]

Horne's visible Blackness was both noticed and commodified. Her skin color was repeatedly communicated as part of her star appeal in headlines, photo captions, or introductions to her in publications. The examples in the previous paragraph come almost entirely from the first year of Horne's career at MGM and are representative of the press coverage she received in the publications intended for white audiences throughout her career. This fascination with her skin color, "recurrent to the point of obsession" as Dyer calls it,[40] is a marker of racialization—a mechanism of othering people of color—and calls into question representations like Dyer's that argue Horne can be credibly perceived as white.

Credible whiteness is determined by "passing" privilege: the ability to be accepted as racially white and therefore to receive exemptions from anti-Black legislature and social environments.[41] Yet the press examples above show how Horne was repeatedly described as unusual in her Blackness rather than as white proximate. Indeed, this kind of language reiterates her perceived Otherness in accounts where authors would prefer to interrogate Horne as "nearly white" rather than as a light-skinned Black woman. In the recent bestseller *Don't Touch My Hair*, Emma Dabiri describes how such evaluations of Blackness function within racist structures:

> Colourism is undoubtedly about proximity to racial whiteness, but proximity is determined by far more than just complexion. In addition to lighter skin, the texture of one's hair, one's facial structure, the shape of one's nose and lips and even one's body type are assessed in calculating who has, and who is denied, proximity to whiteness.[42]

Colorist attitudes toward Horne, measuring her beauty in difference from physical stereotypes or "phenotypic" Blackness, is evident in the following extract by Horne's biographer Paul Gavin. According to Gavin, nightclub impresario Barney Josephson had to ask Horne if she was Black: "if Horne didn't intend to pass, she certainly seemed in hiding."[43] Gavin explains that Johnson instructed Horne to abandon the "Latin" elements of her early performances: "there are dozens of Jewish girls from Brooklyn doing the Latin rhythms. Let me present you as a Negro talent."[44] This quotation from Josephson suggests that Horne was understood in racialized terms but also as "other than Black." Gavin himself perpetuates this notion of "non-Black Otherness" when he says MGM were later unable to identify "what to do with a girl who seemed so white."[45]

Similar to Gavin's claim that Horne did not appear "Black enough," Dyer goes beyond explaining her "passing" privilege. He connects her appearance, her actions, and her relationships together as a performance of Blackness, rather than the normal behavior of a Black person existing in segregated America. In the quotes from Gavin, we see how other white men have interpreted Horne's Black heritage in other ways. However, it has never been acknowledged that she worked with Black artists before, during, and after her MGM career. The friendships Horne cultivated, her advocacy for equal rights including her involvement in fundraising for the NAACP, her onscreen performances with Hazel Scott and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson as well as all the uncredited dancers, chorus members, and musicians imbue her screen work with Blackness. This is irrespective of the other cultural impositions introduced by white production teams, which I discuss later in the chapter. Where these quotations might feel like evidence of Horne's racial ambiguity, they reveal a struggle in the discourse on Horne: that many authors are not yet able to reconcile light-skinned privilege with being Black. There is a perpetual reach to define some enigmatic quality that explains her "exotic" appeal *and* her social privileges without accepting this well-established method of spectating Black women.

Significantly, Dyer and others have not grappled with the evolving use of language in racial discourse across time. While it is undeniable that Horne's appearance caused speculation about her heritage and that her skin color was fetishized as part of her star identity, many African American presses like *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *The Crisis* (the NAACP's main publication) used qualifiers like "sepia," "tan," "café-au-lait," and "chocolate" to characterize skin tones. For example, in July 1944, *The Crisis* promoted five women shortlisted in Miss Sepia America, which was the African American equivalent of Miss America.[46] While it is clear that "Miss Sepia America" is itself steeped in colorism, we must also recognize that these adjectives were part of a contemporary lexicon at a time when African Americans were developing their own descriptions of race that were divorced from slavery.

I do not challenge the role of colorism in advancing Horne's career. It is vital we acknowledge the proximity of her press coverage in magazines like *Ebony* (targeted at African American women) to marketing for skin lightening products. For example, Horne appeared on the cover of the April 1962 edition of *Ebony* above the teaser line "Lena Horne Picks an Easter Hat." The editorial pages for this story are almost directly next to an advertisement for Artra's Skin Tone Cream—a "new miracle beauty bleach" providing "lighter, brighter, more radiant skin beauty."[47] There is undeniable harm being caused by the edification of lighter skin in such contexts. However, we must also recognize that these products were still being marketed in the same publications in 2020 and that while Horne may have passively contributed to the fetishization of light-skinned Black women on screen, she is not responsible for the structures that created and enforce this concept. Instead, I suggest that the repeated (and ongoing) scrutiny of Horne's racial characteristics is a manifestation of structural racism and that this is used to decenter the marginalization she experienced on and off the screen, and to appease white fragility about the mechanisms of spectating Blackness in our recent histories.

## RACIAL READINGS OF HORNE'S PERFORMANCES

Poet and performance scholar Deborah Paredez interprets Lena Horne's career through a discourse of exceptionalism—"a racialized woman who was sought after as both consumable synecdoche for and exception to her "race."[48] In her article on Horne's 1963 appearance on the *Judy Garland Show*, Paradez describes a trade-off for "Black American divas" who were "central to producing and propelling this circuity of desire for marginalized communities."[49] Here, Horne is, at best, made passively complicit in building fetishized and commodifiable notions of Black womanhood on screen. Paradez describes Horne's "disciplined rage-in-restraint" after Garland failed to arrive for rehearsals and Horne was forced to prepare with a stand-in.[50] However, there is an undeniable effervescence and playfulness in Horne's manner during her interactions with Garland. The body language between the stars is open. When they sing "Day In, Day Out," Horne and Garland appear in the same outfit. When Garland slips her arm through her companion's arm, Horne then gently takes and squeezes Garland's hand. Horne also throws her arm around Garland in the final bars of the song. Later, the singers laugh comfortably together. They perform and respond to each other as equals despite Garland's inflated stardom.

Before a medley of their hits, Horne describes to Garland how she was previously encouraged "to sing pretty"[51] without opening her mouth widely, inhibiting her ability to belt and or to smile broadly. Paredez interprets this description of racialized violence against Horne as a projection against minstrelsy:

> For the black female diva, her open mouth is made all the more threatening because of the ways it is also haunted by the always-already-entertaining and potentially sinister minstrel. Monstrous. And desired.[52]

However, Paradez's approach imposes a racial stereotype on a Black artist, while Horne was almost entirely distanced from minstrelsy (still alive and well in film musicals) during her scenes. I suggest instead that this description is just one example of how MGM attempted to mold Horne, minimizing her naturalism and projecting racist visions of Blackness onto her, a practice familiar to anyone who has been a racial outsider in a white institution. Strikingly, Horne's anecdote to Garland was one of many instances (growing more numerous in interviews in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s) when Horne spoke out against the numerous racialized aggressions she suffered in Hollywood. Although she and Garland laugh at the ridiculousness of the request, with Garland feigning disbelief, there is a clear difference between the ways they then perform this medley together.

Where Garland interprets the songs in a decontextualized fashion familiar in all her television performances, Horne starts to mimic Garland's vocal timbre and performance mannerisms. Where Garland performs a neat and tidy interpretation of "Honeysuckle Rose" (performed by Horne in *Thousands Cheer* [1943]), Horne explores the different parts of her voice, introducing a gravel-like tone to some of the phrases in "Meet Me in St. Louis." She riffs and emphasizes the swing with different flexibility to Garland's previously smooth style. This collision of styles continues through the performance and is typified in the final moments of "Love" (originated by Horne in *Ziegfeld Follies* [1945]). Where Garland has relaxed, finding a more percussive singing style to complement her companion, Horne reveals further range in her voice, playing with the offbeats and thoroughly enjoying the moment, before throwing her head back to belt the final note. Here, we see Horne moving freely, crooning, laughing with her eyes, and finally releasing a beautifully executed final note: a performance directly at odds with a commonly held representation that she was cold and disconnected.

By contrast with this television appearance, Bogle describes Horne's movie performances as "so tightly controlled in her acting that she appeared to be the biggest black bourgeois phony the movies had ever seen."[53] He adds that "most of her successes came from exhibiting that extraordinary copper skin tone."[54] He and many others have emphasized a mannered coldness in her work that has become connected to the idea she traded off her skin color. This distance in her manner is perhaps best exemplified by Shane Vogel in his article "Lena Horne's Impersona": "she offered not love, but hostility, not warmth but aloofness, not presence but absence, not immediacy but hesitation, not touch but distance, not an old friend but a stranger."[55] Vogel interprets Horne's (live) performance style as separate to that of the working-class blues singer.[56] The class tension is important in understanding how Horne's activism and film career were symbiotically limited. She neither conformed to the ideal of a gentle, smiling airhead star, nor did she present as an impassioned radical challenging the status quo from the streets. This "coldness" or "aloofness" seems to speak to her perceived class privilege coupled with her costumes that often showed Horne in furs, diamonds, and—vitally—away from other performers.

Horne's onscreen appearances coupled with her press coverage in mermaid gowns and twin suits and pearls is dissonant with familiar messages of Black struggle and activism. For example, Black women involved in the 1960s civil rights actions (like members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) encouraged casual dress, including wearing denim to the March on Washington.[57] Meanwhile, Horne appeared at the 1963 march in an NAACP cap, shift dress, and gloves. There is an undeniable correlation between wealth and celebrity (facilitated by interracial popularity) and palatable conservatism that speaks to whiteness. Yet, one of the most fascinating details visible in Horne's career whether in the 1940s or the 1990s is that she never fully accepted that palatability test, and frequently failed to pass it.

Later in her career, Horne reflected on her complicity in bolstering problematic images of Blackness while at MGM:

> You see, I was caught in a trap, because I was one of the first Black people to be allowed to do this and that. I hadn't realized that I wasn't helping myself or my people. My so-called image was only 50 percent true. The thing is, I didn't *really* belong; I was an isolated entity. There was a distance between me and what was beginning to happen.[58]

Horne describes how she grappled with a "toughness" in her personality that she found difficult to accept.[59] Her use of the word "toughness," an adjective often akin to the unladylike stereotypes of Black womanhood she "subverted" in her MGM screen performances, signposts how Horne suffered from internalized and functional racism.

She realized that "the whites had given me a picture of myself that I just knew wasn't true," later reflecting, "I do regret that I wasted a lot of time with that superimposed image I lived with for so long."[60]

In a monograph on Black female singers and the civil rights movement, Ruth Feldstein concisely represents this before-and-after narrative in Horne's life, explaining how Horne felt she experienced a personal and political awakening in the early 1960s.[61] Where Feldstein briefly covers Horne's film career as foundational to her subsequent activism, below I examine how her film appearances have informed perceptions of Horne's attitude to Blackness before she engaged with civil rights campaigners. Recognizing that Horne operated without a network of Black directors, producers, or other professionals to support her even if the NAACP and others were bolstering her in private, the following sections evaluate how Horne was represented in varied ways during her film musical appearances. I show the variation in her treatment in films with all-Black and multiracial casts and challenge previous representations of coldness in her artistry. Instead, I argue that Horne was deliberately and progressively distanced from other performers, revealing the mechanisms of a racist system, rather than the haughty pretentions of a person disengaged from the experiences of other Black people.

## Horne's "All-Black" film musicals

In order to understand Horne's stardom and attitudes to her Blackness, we must acknowledge why those who commentate on Horne's career return so frequently to *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky.* Both these films, which were produced and released in 1943 soon after the beginning of Horne's film career, demonstrate her comedic, dramatic, and romantic range whether Horne is singing or not. Importantly, her characters Georgia Brown and Selina Rogers contrast each other, showing Horne's capacity to play an innocent starlet or a playful vamp. As noted in the introduction, Horne's first screen appearance in *The Duke Is Tops* also amplifies her ability to carry roles like Selina Rogers in *Stormy Weather* that were only available to white actresses like Judy Garland or Kathryn Grayson in multiracial film musicals.

As Selina Rogers, Horne is also cinematographically coded as a star. We see Horne's acting prowess, including interpreting dramatic scenes unlike any of her other roles, acting with sad tenderness when rejecting Bill "Bojangles" Robinson's offer of a "life at home" as well as with glamour and vivacity in her other offstage appearances. Her character's status is confirmed by the feathers, furs, and jewels she wears throughout. Because her numbers are generally delivered to a large and enraptured audiences including other stars, *Stormy Weather* also extends Horne's musical potential with a range of rhythm numbers and ballads of different moods. The musical variety is important because it also facilitates interactions with other cast members.

In "There's No Two Ways about Love," Horne is able to closely interact with her "pianist" Chick Bailey (Emmett "Babe" Wallace). Similarly, she is surrounded by the chorus and performs with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in later songs. Meanwhile, her character Selina is never put in competition with the other Black women represented in the film.[62] Ada Brown's café solo "That Ain't Right" (accompanied by Fats Waller's "Ain't Misbehavin' "), Mae E. Johnson's backstage rehearsal "I Lost My Sugar in Salt Lake City," and Katherine Dunham's balletic additions to "Stormy Weather" are all presented on their own merit, which is unusual without a comedy element to distinguish musical styles and roles between the female characters. In the problematic "Diga Diga Doo," Horne is paired with female dancers, dressed as zebras, with the male dancers drumming in the background. "Diga Diga Doo" is anomalous in Horne's exotic song-and-dance numbers across her career because she is not directed to flirt with male dancers and is not subjected to white spectatorship in the film itself. Examples like "The Sping" in *Panama Hattie* or "Brazilian Boogie" in *Broadway Melody* show how she is otherwise represented as a beautiful flirt in damagingly polycultural representations of the exotic "Other." For example, in "Brazilian Boogie," we see many broad references ranging from flamenco and Carmen Miranda's tutti-frutti hat to hula dancing and minstrel-like gloved hands (see Figure 8.1), all in a few short minutes.

There are, of course, limitations to the positive representation in *Cabin* and *Stormy Weather*, as is perhaps inevitable with the film's all-white writing and production team. For example, the comparisons between Ethel Waters's character Petunia Jackson and Horne's Georgia Brown reek of misogynoir (an intersection of racism and sexism that negatively affects darker-skinned Black women). Where Horne is shown to be lively and attractive in her seduction of Petunia's husband Little Joe (Eddie "Rochester" Anderson), Waters is made to seem homespun and frigid. In the critical commentary added to *Cabin in the Sky*, scholar Todd Boyd notes the dryness of maternal (and mammie) figures characterized by Waters's Petunia, the comic relief provided by Butterfly McQueen as Lily, and separately in Hattie McDaniel's screen roles.[63] This is an important context to the reception of Horne's performances as a sexualized, exotic, but unattainable light-skinned Black woman. Indeed, her character Georgia Brown is aligned with the Devil and the stereotype of the tragic mulatto. It is clear that problematic interpretations of Horne stem from this trope, that mixed or biracial women

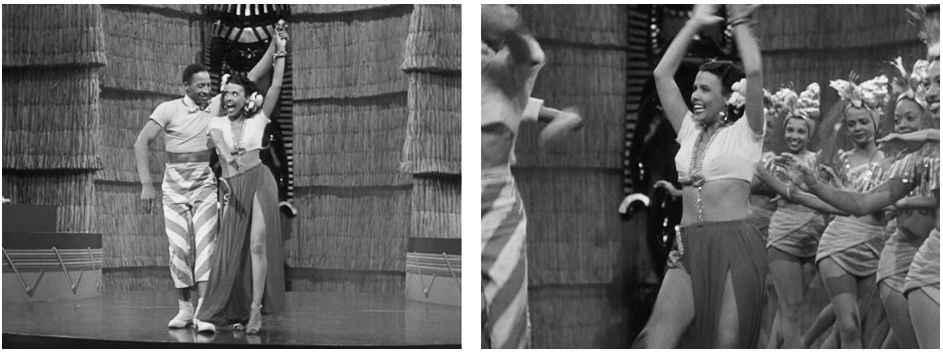

**FIGURE 8.1** Lena Horne in "Brazilian Boogie" from *Broadway Rhythm* (1944).

with "physical beauty, sensuality, mental instability, and an inability to escape [a] disastrous life" are also deemed "more beautiful than full-bodied Black women" because of their white ancestry.[64] We must recognize that the viability of this interpretation of Horne via her first MGM performances relies on the removal of other women *or*, as in *Cabin in the Sky*, an active contrast between female characters. Here, Georgia Brown exists outside of the connotations of the respectable "Black church" and righteous asexuality communicated through the writing of Petunia. Horne's comparative thinness, her light skin color, and her ability to communicate sensuality on screen affirm colorist interpretations of darker-skinned Black women. However, we must also recognize that these screen characterizations were constructed by white authors, a white director, and white casting priorities for implied white audiences.

Allegations about Horne and Waters's mutual hostility are frequently mentioned to amplify the textual issues in *Cabin in the Sky*, and Horne was asked about it often throughout her career. Bogle notes that Waters believed she was "blacklisted" from screen work for six years as a result of her "on-set clashes and outbursts" when making the film.[65] Horne agrees that Waters was persecuted before *Cabin in the Sky* and that this was amplified by the environment on set. In her autobiography, Horne uses examples including changes to the shooting of "Honey in the Honeycomb" to illustrate how Walters might have felt disadvantaged during the filming process.[66] During this song, Horne was forced to sit on a bar under a spotlight rather than moving through the crowd, having chipped a bone in her foot filming a different number.[67] In Horne's account, people alleged that Waters had "hexed" Horne, causing the injury, and Horne implies that newcomers to the set were primed to distrust Waters.[68] She acknowledges how Waters was affected by racism earlier in her career and that this shaped her conduct on set. Horne also passively recognizes that she was encouraged to fear and question Waters's attitude toward her and was repeatedly warned of Waters's difficult behavior.

Like *Cabin in the Sky*, which is saturated with Black stereotypes, *Stormy Weather* includes painful relics of minstrelsy, including a cakewalk and two Black comedians blacking up for a long sketch as tramps whose car has broken down. In "Diga Diga Doo," Horne's performance is followed by a dance, clearly intended to evoke a tribal ritual, building on the "exotic" elements of her song section. However, in a subsequent scene, the "African Dance," there is a disruption of this colonialized representation of generic African Otherness. Chick Bailey, Selena's costar, criticizes Bojangles's "cheap hoofing" dancing style, saying that they should stick to the "classy" material (meaning the fetishized safari-like song-and-dance numbers Chick stars in).[69] However, Bill creates his own dance performance by tapping the percussion line behind Chick's back as he sings. With choreographic details, including an exploration of the height of the set and a call-and-response between Bill's tapping and the other performers, Bill's subversive act foreshadows the Nicholas Brothers' iconic dance section, "Jumpin' Jive" (*Stormy Weather*'s finale). This disruption, introducing a contemporary dance style and prefacing one of the most dazzling dance performances in film musical history, interrupts the credibility of the onstage depiction of "Africa" as (1) dynamic and engaging or (2) the most commercially viable way of presenting Black artistry on stage. Bill's tap dance does not negate the stereotyping or colonial attitudes communicated in these scenes, but it does critique these numbers, whereas Horne is unironically presented in similar contexts several times in her film performances among white actors. When Black artists are involved, exoticism has some critique. Where the films have predominantly white casts, such scenes are the only spaces where Black artists appear at all.

## PRESENTING BLACK PERFORMERS IN MULTIRACIAL FILM MUSICALS

As highlighted in the previous section, one of the strengths of Horne's appearances in *Cabin in Sky* and, most noticeably, in *Stormy Weather* is the harmonious performance environments for her different song appearances. Even in her balladlike interpretation of the title song "Stormy Weather," it is clear Selina is loved and commanding a substantial audience. In many other scenes, she and other prolific artists, including Cab Calloway and Fats Waller, are able to coexist harmoniously without competition over talent or screen time. When we contrast the representation of Black performers in *Stormy Weather* to a ten-minute segment in *I Dood It*, also made in 1943, it is possible to see some obvious differences between how Black artists are allowed to perform together. For example, in *I Dood It*, Hazel Scott and the company, who arrive separately and ahead of Horne, are late to their audition without apology and their lateness is noted by the white backers and theater managers waiting for them.[70] When Horne arrives in the scene after Hazel Scott has performed, she is whisked straight into the song "Jericho" after a joke about her also being late. These are small details, but they passingly frame the Black artists as time illiterate, disorganized, and disrespectful, which draws from all-too-familiar coon and Sambo stereotypes that emerged under Jim Crow. The lyrics and interaction between Horne and the invisible brass section during her introduction to the song are also reminiscent of the spiritual "Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho,"[71] also connecting the performers with the relics of enslavement in America's popular music. Attention is drawn to the Blackness of these artists and, more subtly, to their status as the descendants of enslaved Africans.

The filming of "Jericho" also is significant because Horne is distinguished from the rest of the company who sing together. She is also dressed in a light and shining gown while the others are costumed in dull fabrics or in black. When Horne is joined by backing singers, they are presented rigidly in contrast to the effervescent freedom of movement while singing alongside Scott. The structured sectioning of the song also facilitates this distancing. Horne opens "Jericho" alone, accompanied by an invisible orchestra, and set against a contrasting but romantic background (see Figure 8.2a). Her crooning is interrupted by the rest of the company, including a small jazz ensemble, who surround and accompany Scott on an elevated platform (see Figure 8.2b). Horne is then presented in contrastingly formal settings, singing smoothly, surrounded by a male

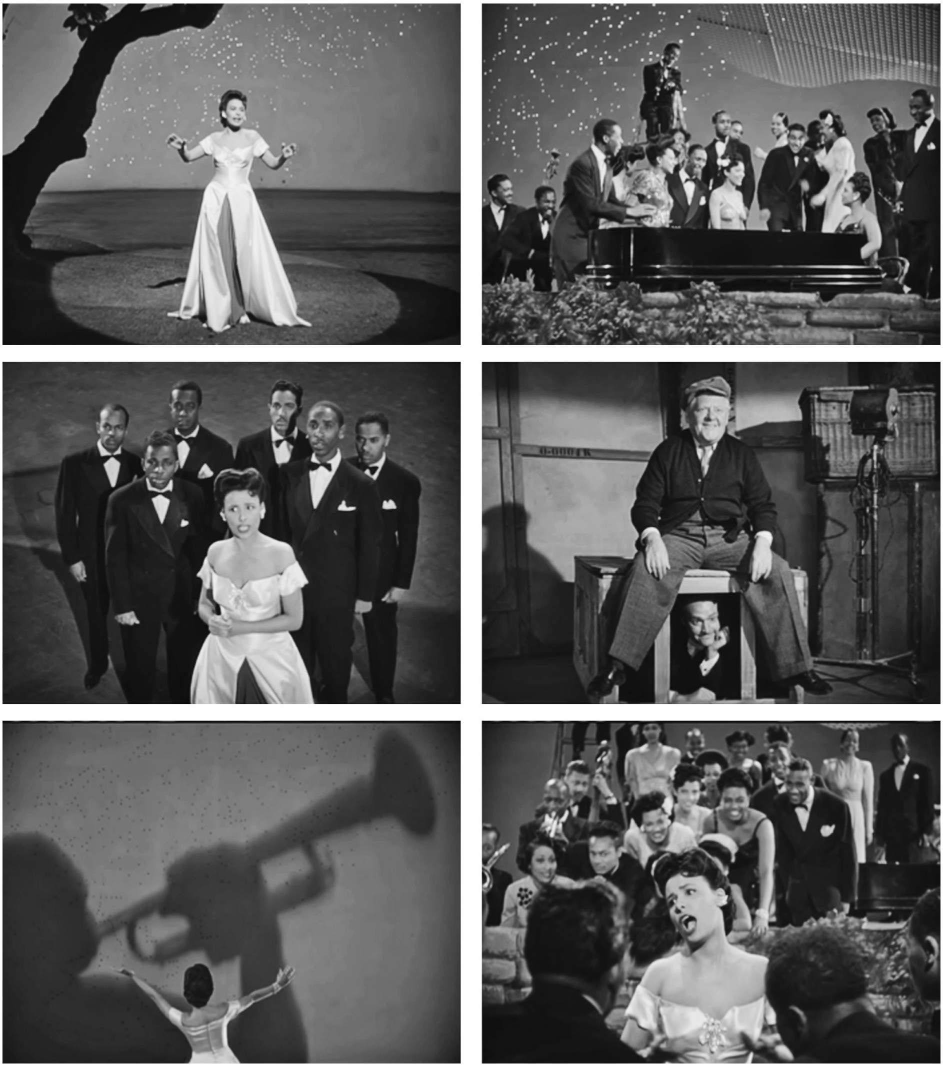

**FIGURE 8.2** Stills taken from different sections of "Jericho" in *I Dood It* (1943).

sub-chorus (see Figure 8.2c) who repeat her phrases. When she comes alive to belt and declaim, Horne steps into a shot on her own, which ends with a cutaway to Red Skelton and the stage manager (see Figure 8.2d), who are clearly transported by her.

The action returns then to the male sub-chorus who march to surround Horne as she enters a new evangelistic call-and-response. Again, the small ensemble is contrasted by the company on the platform who sing together with Hazel Scott entering for a solo over the top. At the end of this section, Horne appears, positioned "outside the wall," and they sing down to her. As the number continues, Horne is repeatedly directed to run or move into her own space away from the others, including when she summons a trumpeter (see Figure 2e) and he blows down the wall that the others stand behind. Throughout, Horne performs alongside but separately from the others, always the star and never the accompaniment. In Figure 2f, she is shown alone while being surrounded by the ensemble behind and the sub-chorus in front. Even in the final shot when she climbs onto the platform with the others, Horne moves in front of the piano, significantly closer to the camera than Scott or the ensemble. By contrast with all the playful interactions in *Stormy Weather*, there is inequality in the screen time, arrangements, and camera work that prioritize Horne over the other Black artists involved in this scene. While their performances are not diminished, they are clearly shown as secondary, enabling readings of Horne's distance and detachment from other Black artists.

Perhaps the most extreme example of the contrasts between freedoms afforded Horne while performing in *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather* and her appearances in multiracial film musicals is during the song "Love" from *Ziegfeld Follies* (1945). Although Horne's interpretation of Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane's standard would continue to form part of her musical repertoire for years, the direction and set dressing choices by Lemuel Ayers demonstrate how anti-Blackness operated in these environments. Horne delivers a passionate and rousing vocal in a drab yet ambiguously exotic bar, decorated with bare bamboo posts, a live parrot, and apathetic Black extras. The objectification of Horne's companions in the scene seems a conscious choice. As Horne vamps around the tables, full of sensuality and vigor, the seated audience responds minimally to her performance. Few heads turn as she moves around the space, although Horne is able to engage with a few men and the women seated with them show their displeasure. However, many of the Black women in this scene, all of whom are darker-skinned and bigger-bodied, simply ignore her.

The exotic café entertainer was not an unusual role for Horne. Her first MGM performance was as an unnamed entertainer in *Panama Hattie*,[72] performing an original song "The Sping" and Cole Porter's "Just One of Those Things." "The Sping" exemplifies how Horne was paired with culturally ambiguous but tokenistic material while performing to white audiences. In this scene, she dances in a tropical skirt, singing about a "favorite house boy Chico" who performs a secret Latin dance known only to the people of Jamaica and Trinidad while dance act the Berry Brothers add spectacular dance breaks between refrains.[73] Scoping references to Spain, to the Caribbean, and to Latin America show the deliberate lack of cultural clarity these sequences had.[74] Café scenes across film musical history include problematic representations of performers of color. This was not unique to Horne's career. However, these song-and-dance moments, in films ranging from *Swing Time* (1936) to *Victor/Victoria* (1982) and *La La Land* (2016), also provide positive performance environments that spotlight the featured artist and include appreciative audiences. In this context, the sequence containing "Love" is highly unusual. Horne's audience is apathetic to, and sometimes disapproving of, her performance. In this example, like in *I Dood It*, Horne is distanced again from Black collectives on screen. However, "Love" does not amplify her star status among other Black talent, it merely presents her as "Other" to the Black people around her.

## Isolating Lena

George Sidney, who directed *Thousands Cheer* (1943), described Horne as "the first glamorous black woman the screen saw," changing how white audiences conceived of Blackness while the studio's hairdressing unit enforced "rules that their members (all white) could not touch a black head."[75] As a result, the head of hairdressing Sydney Guilaroff created hairstyles for Horne himself and hired Black hairdressers to help her around the union. In *Hollywood Black*, Bogle neutralizes the studio's efforts to celebrate Horne's beauty, suggesting that the test sessions working on her hair, makeup, and appropriate lighting evidences her value to the studio at the start of her career.[76] Yet this does not sufficiently engage with the inevitable trauma of going through the hairdressers' boycott or being made up as though in blackface because the studio provided foundations made for much darker-skinned actor Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. This is a form of humiliation that undercuts Horne's pin-up status and must be part of our conceptualization of her work. It is also worth noting that when a foundation formula was developed to suit Horne's complexion, her shade "Light Egyptian" was subsequently used to darken the skin of "white actresses [the studios] wanted to play Negro or mulatto parts"[77] like Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra* (1963).[78]

Although there is considerable commentary about Horne's ability to pass white, there is limited recognition that she was almost entirely separated from white performers on screen, and this segregation speaks to her racialization rather than an ability to integrate. As Dyer and others have noted, Horne filmed many of her numbers alone and the footage of an "audience" was spliced through the song during the editing process so that she is unable to interact with live audience members.[79] This distance from others, also contributing to the statuesque aesthetic of Horne's press photos, is perhaps exemplified in many of her performances including "Honeysuckle Rose" from *Thousands Cheer* (1943) and "If You Can Dream" in *Meet Me in Las Vegas* (1956). During the introduction to "If You Can Dream," Horne is revealed alone on stage. Initially behind a translucent curtain, Horne is spotlit as she sings Brodzsky and Cahn's sultry, escapist ballad. Having pivoted her body once from right to left, Horne then takes a handful of steps onto a pedestal in front of which the curtain once again falls.

In "Honeysuckle Rose," Horne performs to an empty set, with a jazz ensemble "off to the side" in their own shot. With pillars of mirrors behind her, we are presented with Horne singing and dancing to her own reflection. Her audience (clearly filmed separately in a different location) is cut in at the end of the song, so Horne sings to her own image as much as to an empty space. It is hard not to notice similar cuts between the crowded white spaces of the orchestra and audience "watching" Horne's performance in "Where or When" and "The Lady Is a Tramp" in *Words and Music* (1948). In this pair of songs, Horne generally avoids the audience who are kept out of, or in the periphery of, the different shots. Like in "Honeysuckle Rose," Horne is able to move around, swishing her skirts and posturing. However, she does not come right into the space. She is kept

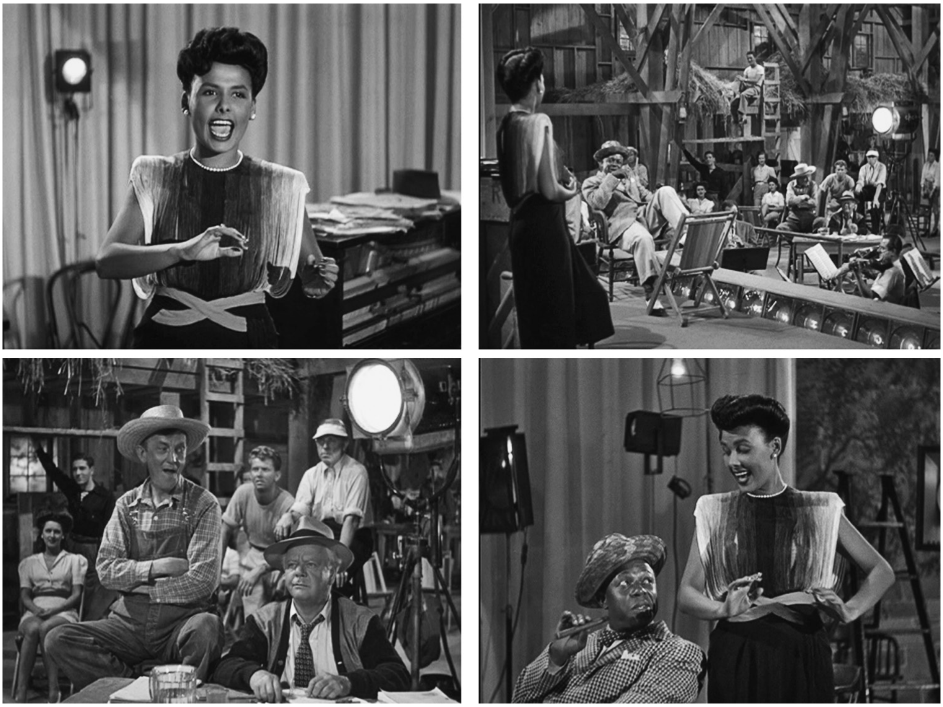

**FIGURE 8.3** "Somebody Loves Me" from *Broadway Rhythm* (1944).

away from people. For example, we do not have familiar shots of the film's protagonists looking out at her from the audience.

These distancing shot choices increased through the 1940s. During "The Sping" or "Just One of Those Things" in *Panama Hattie* in 1942, Horne's (white) audience is visibly present surrounding the performance space or sat on tables that she walks through. In *Broadway Rhythm* (1944), there is a similar cut between Horne's performance on stage and the audience (clearly elsewhere) during "Brazilian Boogie." However, there is also a depiction of the racial divide between Black and white performers in her second solo, "Somebody Loves Me." In this song, Horne's character Fernway de la Fer performs the Gershwins' song to audition for a role in a new musical. Fernway, Eddie (Eddie "Rochester" Anderson), and her accompanist, composer and arranger Phil Moore, are all up on stage while the white orchestra and audience watch the song (see Figure 8.3). Although Horne performs over the footlights as she sings, her only interaction with a person outside of her songs is a playful glance to Eddie, who is not seated with the other observers even though he moves among the white cast in other scenes. Eddie tries to capitalize on Horne's talent by swooping in as her "agent," but this storyline stops immediately because Fernway vanishes from the rest of film after this song.

Horne's outfit in "Somebody Loves Me" is also striking. In one of her least formal costumes, she wears a striped fringed top in a spectrum of browns, tucked into a black skirt with a crisscross brown belt. All the other people on screen have other colors in

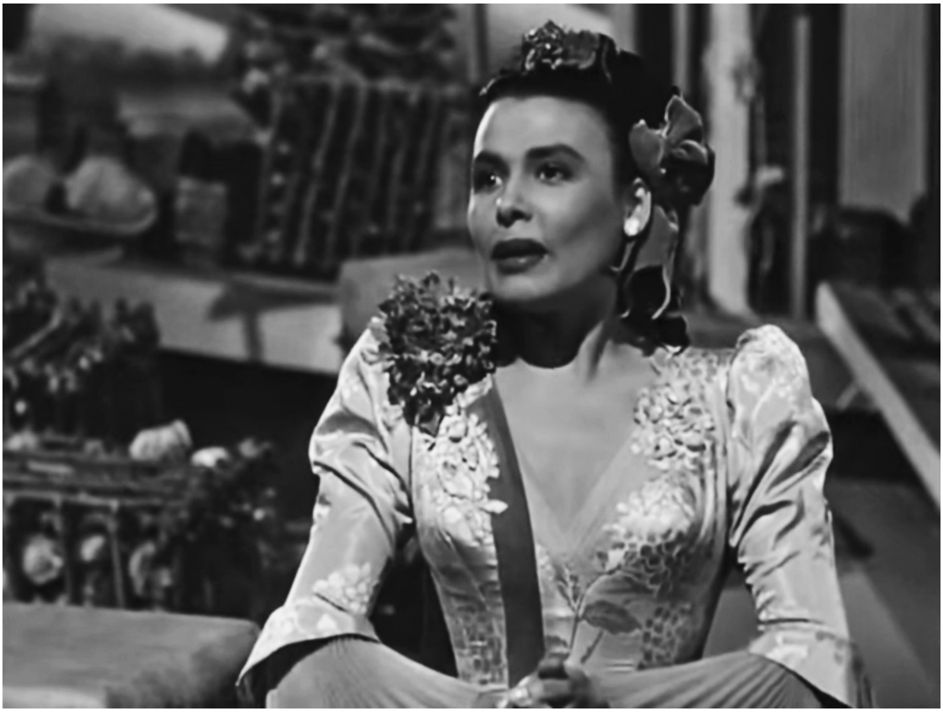

**FIGURE 8.4** Lena Horne as Julie La Verne (from *Show Boat*) in *Till the Clouds Roll By* (1946).

their costumes (mainly blues and pinks), so Horne's "brownness" is amplified after performing in a garish yellow and pink two-piece in "Brazilian Boogie." These choices highlight how Horne's appearance was compartmentalized. In "If You Can Dream" and "Honeysuckle Rose," where she sings in isolation, Horne is dressed in floor-length, figure-hugging satin gowns contributing to the statuesque "look but don't touch" aspect of her onscreen identity. In *Words and Music*, Horne is dressed in a mid-calf oyster-toned dress with a tactile pink underskirt that is color-matched to the magenta, lilac, and purple "exotic" flowers appliquéd up the skirt, around her waist, up her neck, and fashioned as a floral bow-like fascinator. The costume strongly resembles her costume during her performance of "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" in the musical biopic of composer Jerome Kern: *Till The Clouds Roll By* (1946) (see Figures 8.4 and 8.5).

Horne fleetingly appears in a cut-down "performance" of Act I of *Show Boat* (1927) during the opening of *Till The Clouds Roll By*. In *Show Boat*, Horne plays Julie La Verne, a biracial but white passing actress who is forced to leave the company when her racial heritage is revealed. Unlike either of the familiar second and third film adaptations of the musical (1936 and 1951), Horne's Julie is only briefly included in the big production number "Cotton Blossom" when the cast of actors is introduced to the adoring crowd. Here, Horne receives only eight seconds of screen time,[80] appearing center frame and then backing sideways out of shot. During this snippet, she is never entirely squared to the screen like the other cast members, nor is her shot presented as a deliberate tableau

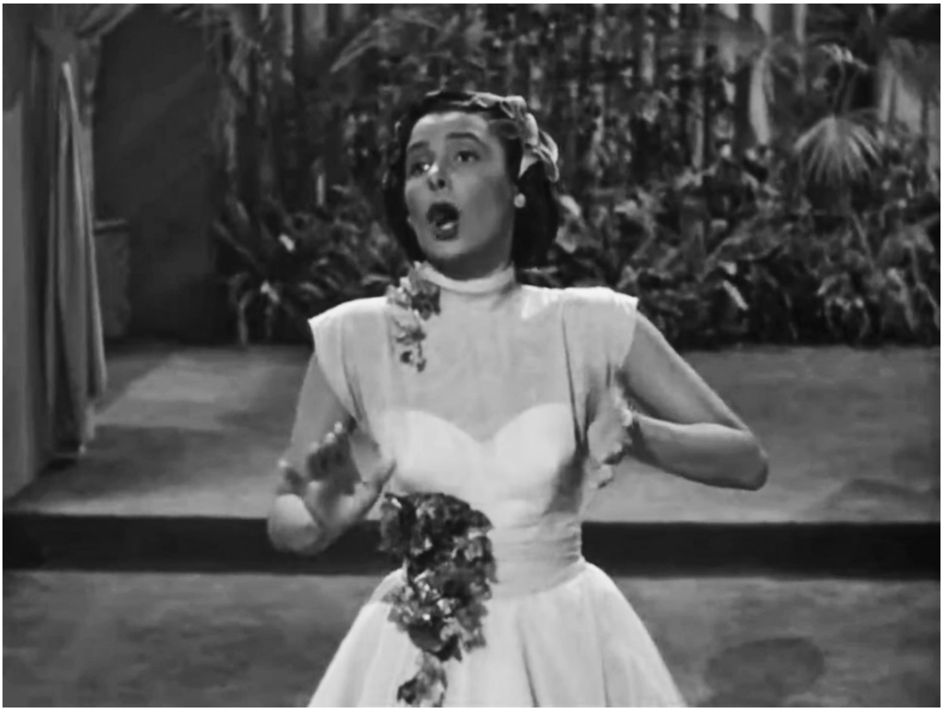

**FIGURE 8.5** Lena Horne appearing as herself in *Words and Music* (1948).

like the other characters before and after her. She is then invisible (and possibly not on set) for the rest of the scene. A few minutes later, Horne reappears alone to deliver a decontextualized performance of Julie's solo "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man." In a full production of *Show Boat* (and in both films), this song telegraphs her mixed heritage to Queenie, the African American cook on the boat, who overhears Julie singing to *Show Boat*'s heroine, Magnolia. In *Till The Clouds Roll By,* Horne has no onstage audience and performs "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" as a wistful and introspective ballad, rather than as a metatextual song admired by Magnolia that also comments on the relationships between the women and their husbands throughout the musical. Importantly, *Till the Clouds Roll By* cuts straight from "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" to Joe (Caleb Peterson) singing "Ol' Man River" surrounded by the company swaying. While it might be said that these songs were put together so that the Black artists could be cut from the film more easily, this choice also links Julie's song with the struggles felt by Black workers living under segregation. Where separations are passively constructed in Horne's other multiracial film musicals, the difference in environment and experience is blatantly communicated here.

When Horne appears again during the tableau of stars singing excerpts from Kern's songbook in the finale of *Till the Clouds Roll By,* she sings the equally plaintive "Why Was I Born," distancing her once more from the joy and pageantry in many of the other song performances in the film. Noticeably, her excerpt is introduced by a dramatic orchestral arrangement of the first line of "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," linking her appearances in the film and the theme of troubled love with Horne's contribution to the soundtrack.[81] The milk chocolate backdrop, her white dress, and her copper accessories emphasize Horne's coloring, rather than anonymizing her race, and she sings on an open balcony surrounded by metal vines, resembling an ornamental figure in a garden. While all of the singers are static in their sequences during this medley, costumed in white and against abstract sets, Horne's staging epitomizes the effect of being "pasted to a pillar" outlined in previous examples.[82] Like in her earlier appearance during "Cotton Blossom," Horne is not positioned to the camera for the opening phrases of "Why Was I Born" and performs over the frame while the shot pans out before she literally pulls at the lens, seeming to draw it back to her face on the line "Why do I try to draw you near me?"[83] Having cropped the shot close to Horne to focus on the final phrases of the song, the music returns again to "Ol' Man River" for the final moments of the film. While this double pairing of Horne, a Black actress interpreting sad songs, with a revered (if controversial) anthem about Black suffering may be coincidental, the aesthetics of this second performance of "Ol' Man River" highlight Horne's outsider status on screen and amplify many of the dynamics highlighted in this section.

Where the fictional suffering of Julie La Verne is credibly linked to the pain felt by the Black workers on the showboat, Frank Sinatra's interpretation of "Ol' Man River" is exceptionally dissonant, especially following Horne's soulful performance immediately before. In his sequence, Sinatra appears on a plinth following a camera pan through a swirl of white chorus members who sweep white feathers like laurels as they line the set. Sinatra is elevated but surrounded by a large orchestra dressed in white concert dress on a utopic set, which is also draped with white cloth. While this may seem like a logical culmination of this medley, Sinatra's segment has altered implications when you combine the blatant whiteness of this aesthetic, the content and context of the song he is singing, the professional limitations Horne faced while making these films, and the fact that her scenes were conceived so that they might be easily cut from the film during distribution anyway.

## THE GOOD WITCH: RECLAIMING LENA HORNE

In 1981, Lena Horne was awarded a Tony Special Award for her one-woman show *Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music*. During her acceptance speech, Horne stared down the camera, caressing her award, commenting: "I can tell you that sometimes you have to wait fifty years. Sometimes it comes in a year. But whenever it comes, I'm just so happy I'm getting all these flowers before I lose my teeth."[84] Then, she delivered a raw and punchy performance of "Believe in Yourself," the finale of *The Lady and Her Music*: the song she interpreted in the film adaptation of *The Wiz* (1978). In *The Wiz* and subsequent live recordings, Horne reveals a dynamic and free vocal quality completely in contrast to the light sing-song tone she used in many of her MGM performances. Standing in a floor-length blue gown and backed by lines of illuminated bulbs, her Tony Awards performance clearly acknowledged the aesthetic of the cinematography in Sidney Lumet's film. However, at this ceremony, Horne showed her command of live performance that had taken her from the chorus at the Cotton Club to Noble Sissle's touring band to Café Society Downtown, before landing her break in Hollywood.

The penultimate song in *The Wiz*, "Believe in Yourself," positions Glinda the Good Witch as a voice of affirmation and empowerment to Diana Ross's Dorothy.[85] Horne becomes a guardian angel and representation of hope as she reinvents a subdued if touching song Ross has performed to her friends. Unlike many of her MGM performances where Horne "plays" herself, *The Wiz* provided Horne with a character role while acknowledging her real-life stardom, as Jeanine Basinger notes:

> When Glinda the Good Witch comes down from her star, Horne is radiant in sparkling blue, with dozens of stars on her gown and headpiece. She looks younger than anyone else in the entire movie, even though she's sixty-one at the time. She sings "Believe in Yourself" as if she means it, and gives it something it never had before—sass and sex appeal and genuine conviction. She's one of the most beautiful women ever, a real Glinda and a real musical power. She should have had more.[86]

Like Ross, Horne's face is deliberately unaltered with makeup and prosthetics, unlike almost all other star performers in the film. Literally, yet powerfully, Tony Walton costumed her crowned with stars (see Figure 8.6) and she floats, sparkling among a cluster of cherub-like children, sparkling in sequins, in an ethereal other world. This gesture both acknowledges the tradition of distancing Horne from her onscreen audience

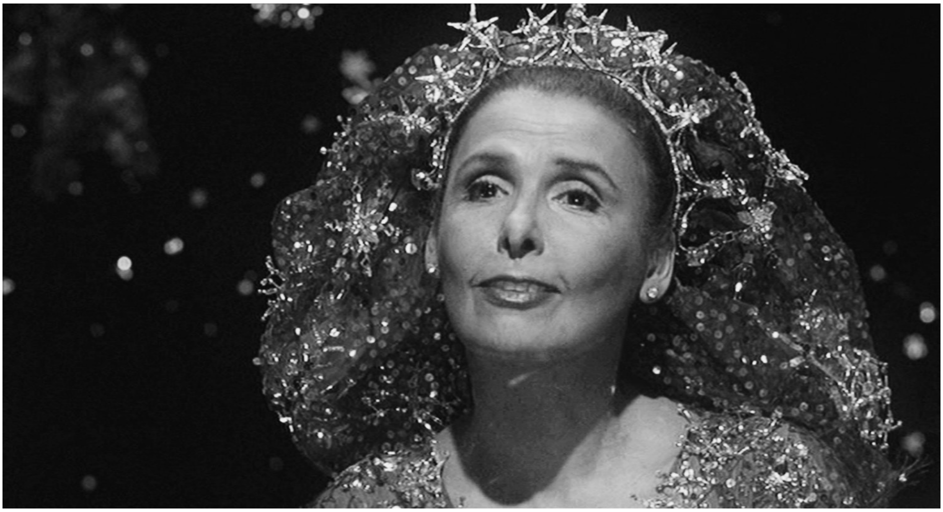

**FIGURE 8.6** Lena Horne as Glinda the Good in *The Wiz* (1978).

and distinguishes her as a venerated outsider who has been welcomed into this updated performance space. In the quote above, Basinger highlights how Horne reinvents the song but does not recognize how this performance extends her onscreen persona. In three minutes, Horne communicates what she was never permitted to do on film—to be loud and unpolished without compromising any of her star quality.

Musically, Horne is afforded new opportunities in *The Wiz* that are dissimilar to most of her previous performances. Quincy Jones's vocal arrangement and the accompanying orchestration is much richer than that used in the original Broadway cast album.[87] Similarly, Horne's sung performance is energetic and increasingly impassioned, conjuring the feeling of a rousing gospel number, unlike Dee Dee Bridgewater's smoother soulful version, which has subtler melodic gestures. In combination, the arrangement, orchestration, and Horne as the vocal interpreter introduce new layers to Charlie Smalls's original song. This includes building from a small and largely acoustic ensemble to introduce an electronic organ, and later, strings that sometimes double the voice or provide a countermelody. Horne herself begins the number in a semi-speak-sing tone before entering the first refrain slowly, building to "whoops" and belting that she uses to emphasize the final "Believe in yourself / As I believe in you."[88] In *The Wiz*, we see Horne as she was with Judy Garland, exploring all her different vocal tones, with a form of performative freedom unlike any of her earlier performances.

As noted earlier, Horne reprises "If You Believe" in *The Wiz* immediately after Ross has performed it. Glinda appears in the scene Dorothy has liberated the Winkies from Evillene the Wicked Witch of the West. In the film adaptation, the enslaved Winkies symbolically shed and burn their costumes as part of "Everybody Rejoice/Brand New Day." This demonstration of liberty and the reclamation of self is closely proximate to Horne's appearance.[89] In the next scene, Ross performs "Believe in Yourself" gently. The orchestration is sparse, and Ross uses a light, sometimes breathy, tone to soothe her companions. When Glinda arrives, she bolsters Dorothy, reminding her that she has the same qualities she has just celebrated in her companions: "home is knowing . . . Knowing *your* mind, knowing *your* heart, knowing *your* courage."[90] Horne's "Believe in Yourself" becomes a call to power where Ross's earlier performance is thoughtful affirmation. When the reprise is over, Glinda becomes an audience-surrogate "watching" Dorothy say goodbye to her friends, leaving Horne to respond to Dorothy's "Now, I'm ready" with the final line of dialogue: "Then, go home."[91]

Because the reprise of "Believe in Yourself" follows the first performance of the song, the story links Glinda and Dorothy together as two sides of the force for good in Oz. In the film adaptation, the casting adds a further layer, connecting Horne and Ross together. As Ross developed her own stardom, this connection with Horne aligns Ross with other influential Black artists involved in changing artistic representation in American popular culture. Ross remains one of a relatively small community of African American women to replicate (and exceed) Horne's earlier dominance in the Black press. For example, Ross took over Horne's previous position as *Ebony*'s favorite cover star, as she rose to fame in the 1960s and 1970s, and the magazine selected a behind-the-scenes shot of Horne and Ross together with Richard Pryor (The Wizard) in their coverage of the film's release.[92] (Horne is featured twice in the article, although her appearance in the film is fleeting.[93]) Dyer aligns Horne's professional and private friendships with Duke Ellington, Paul Robeson, and Hazel Scott as part of a performance of Blackness rather than evidence that she found safety in the Black creative community she belonged to.[94] However, Horne's performance in *The Wiz* communicates her venerated position among younger Black artists as well as her pedigree as a veteran artist in film musicals. The timing of her performance and the content of the song, with its affirming "trust in your own power" message, is an affirmation of Horne's success. It confirms her professional legacy and demonstrates her self-confidence in her Blackness, directly counteracting by commentators on her career.

In *The Wiz*, Horne is allowed to be the star without cost to any of the other individuals on screen (reminiscent of her performance in *Stormy Weather*). Triumphant and bold, her interpretation of "Believe in Yourself" neither overwhelms Ross's subsequent delivery of "Home" nor allows the audience to ignore her ability to command the screen. When examining later renditions of this song, including her performance at the 1981 Tony Awards or following "Stormy Weather" as the close to *The Lady and Her Music*, it is clear what this song, Smalls's lyrics, and its performance opportunities meant for Horne. It unifies the star identity of a flirtatious young singer and movie star, the civil rights campaigner whose career was interrupted by earlier political action, and the skilled entertainer who equaled Judy Garland in star power and vocal skill.

It is poignant to watch footage of Horne receiving a standing ovation as part of the 1984 Kennedy Center Honors. The poise and guardedness so connected to her star persona is completely abandoned as she cries freely, visibly moved, and overwhelmed. In the preface to a pre-recorded tribute about Horne, the singer, actress, and activist Diahann Carroll explains how Horne paved the way for many Black stars before her: "she was and still is a pioneer for women, and especially, Black women."[95] Carroll then closes her tribute with: "when I grow up, I sure wanna be just like you."[96] The subsequent video segment summarizing Horne's life and career begins and ends with footage of "Believe in Yourself" taken from *The Lady and Her Music*. It is paired with "Stormy Weather" in her one-woman show, and these two songs show how Horne's earliest and final film performances simultaneously illuminate decades of work and struggle. Horne's performance of "Believe in Yourself" in *The Wiz* situates her career in a narrative of struggle and pain while creating new space for the African American stars that followed and continue to follow her. Finally, Horne had found a feature role truly worth her time and talents, unknowingly encapsulating the complicated, brutal, but hopeful journey of African American women in the performing arts.

## NOTES

1. Yolanda Sangweni, "Audra McDonald Wins 6th Tony Award, Makes Broadway History," *Essence*, June 9, 2014, https://www.essence.com/awards-events/red-carpet/tony-awards/audra-mcdonald-wins-6th-tony-award-makes-broadway-history/.

2. The Nicholas Brothers achieved a similar contract with Twentieth Century–Fox at a similar time. Leslie Palmer, *Lena Horne* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 75.
3. I want to extend huge thanks to Furaha Asani, keisha bruce, Nadena Doharty, and Leighan Renaud for taking time to discuss and encourage my research for this chapter as it evolved.
4. Palmer, *Lena Horne*, 13.
5. Palmer, *Lena Horne,* 19.
6. Lena Horne and Richard Schickel, *Lena* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1966), 120.
7. Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 120.
8. Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 121.
9. Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 121.
10. Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 127.
11. Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 127.
12. Horne describes Cole Porter as "perfectly charming" and that he would invite her back *as a guest* a number of times. However, she also explains how the white guests were not interested in mixing with her at this first encounter. Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 128.
13. Donald Bogle, *Hollywood Black: The Stars, the Films, the Film Makers* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2019), 54–55.
14. Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 134.
15. Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 135–136.
16. Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 137.
17. Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 36.
18. Sean Griffin, "The Gang's All Here: Generic versus Racial Integration in the 1940s Musical," *Cinema Journal* 42 (2002): 36.
19. Horne, quoted in Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 69.
20. Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 173.
21. A volunteer-led organization, chaired by Paul Robeson with W. E. B. Du Bois as vice-chair, focusing on anti-colonialism and pan-Africanism. The organization linked the oppression of African Americans and the suffering of all colonized communities. Its activities included supporting union actions around the world and lobbying the United Nations on humanitarian issues. Mark Alan Rhodes II, "Placing Paul Robeson in History: Understanding His Philosophical Framework," *Journal of Black Studies* 47 (2016): 244.
22. Palmer, *Lena Horne*, 103.
23. Palmer, *Lena Horne*, 103.
24. Horne followed in the footsteps of Juanita Hall, who won Best Supporting Actress for her appearance in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* in 1950.
25. Lumet was in fact Horne's son-in-law at the time.
26. Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 74.
27. Lena Horne, in interview on the "Critical commentary" in *Cabin in the Sky*, directed by Vincente Minnelli (Burbank: Turner Entertainment, 2006) [DVD], 43:15–33; Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 141–143.
28. *Cabin in the Sky* [critical commentary], 53:00–53:26.
29. Alex Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 378.
30. Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 67.
31. John Gruen, "Features: Lena Horne's New Love Life," *Vogue*, June 1, 1972, 92.
32. bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the* Movies (London: Routledge, 1996), 201.
33. Richard Dyer, "Singing Prettily: Lena Horne in Hollywood," in *In Space of a Song: The Uses of Song in Film* (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), 115.

34. Dyer, "Singing Prettily," 115.
35. Palmer, *Lena Horne*, 19.
36. *The Duke Is Tops*, directed by William Nolte (La Crosse: Echo Bridge Home Entertainment, 2004) [DVD] 44:24.
37. Digitized records of these lobby cards are available to view online via the National Museum of African American History and Culture. See examples like: https://www.si.edu/object/lobby-card-bronze-venus:nmaahc_2013.118.96.1.
38. "Chocolate Cream Chanteuse," *Time*, January 4, 1943, 62.
39. "The World's Sexiest Negro Women," *Jet*, December 27, 1951, 35.
40. Dyer, "Singing Prettily," 116.
41. Brit Bennett's debut novel *The Vanishing Half* (Little, Brown Book Group, 2020)uses the different experiences of twin sisters to show how light-skinned Black women are sometimes able to assimilate as white or continue to be racialized as Black depending on their social environments.
42. Emma Dabiri, *Don't Touch My Hair* (London: Penguin, 2019), 15.
43. James Gavin, *Stormy Weather: The Life of Lena Horne* (New York: Attria, 2009), 84.
44. Gavin, *Stormy Weather*, 84.
45. Gavin, *Stormy Weather*, 105.
46. "Lovely Lassies in the Sepia Miss America Contest," *The Crisis*, July 1944, 221.
47. "The Artra Promise . . . lighter, lovelier skin beauty for YOU!" [full-page advertisement], *Ebony*, April 1962.
48. Deborah Paredez, "Lena Horne and Judy Garland: Divas, Desire, and Discipline in the Civil Rights Era," *TDR: The Drama Review* 58 (Winter 2014): 109.
49. Paredez, "Lena Horne and Judy Garland," 107.
50. Paredez, "Lena Horne and Judy Garland," 108.
51. *The Judy Garland Show Collection* (United States: Infinity Entertainment, 2009) [DVD].
52. Deborah Paredez, "Lena Horne and Judy Garland," 116.
53. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 132.
54. Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 125.
55. Shane Vogel, "Lena Horne's Impersona," *Camera Obscura* 23 (2008): 11–12.
56. Vogel, "Lena Horne's Impersona," 11–21.
57. Tanisha C. Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 84.
58. Gruen, "Features," 94.
59. Gruen, "Features," 95.
60. Gruen, "Features," 155.
61. Feldstein, *How It Feels to Be Free,* 191.
62. There is one passing "joke" about mistaken identity in Horne's first scene where Bill sees Horne and his pal thinks Bill is ogling a bigger-bodied, older Black woman.
63. *Cabin in the Sky* [DVD], critical commentary, 04:08–04:20.
64. Brandale Mills, "Old Stereotypes Made New: A Textual Analysis on the Tragic Mulatto Stereotype in Contemporary Hollywood," *Howard Journal of Communications* 30 (October 2019): 413.
65. Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 71.
66. Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 150–155.
67. Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 153.

68. I strongly encourage readers to seek out Horne's full account of the studio whispers and her own preconceptions about Ethel Waters in *Lena*. Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 150–155.
69. *Stormy Weather*, directed by Andrew L. Stone (United States: Twentieth Century–Fox, 2006) [DVD], 31:47.
70. *I Dood It*, directed by Vincente Minnelli (Burbank: Turner Entertainment Co., 2009) [DVD].
71. This title is quoted in the last line of "Jericho."
72. Horne was cast in *Panama Hattie* late in the film's production. For example, her name is omitted from the documentation submitted to the Motion Picture Production Code, and the lyrics for "The Sping" were sent in separately from the general paperwork.
73. *Panama Hattie*, directed by Norman Z. McLeod (Los Angeles: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer/Best Video, 2012) [DVD].
74. See earlier analysis of "Brazilian Boogie" in *Broadway Rhythm* for another example of this ambiguity.
75. Quoted from George Sidney's notes on "Honeysuckle Rose" included in his papers at the Smithsonian and available digitally via Joann Stevens, "In Tribute to Lena Horne," *National Museum of American History* [online], May 14, 2010, https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/2010/05/in-tribute-to-lena-horne.html.
76. Bogle, *Hollywood Black*, 68.
77. Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 136.
78. Ford, *Liberated Threads*. 45.
79. Dyer, "Singing Prettily," 129–130.
80. *Till The Clouds Roll By*, directed by Richard Whorf et al. (n.l.: The Film Detective, 2016) [DVD], 05:05–05:13.
81. *Till The Clouds Roll By*, 2:09:01–2:10:05
82. Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 140.
83. Kathryn Grayson and Tony Martin also sing away from the camera but the camera lingers on their faces, not varying in position. *Till The Clouds Roll By* [DVD], 02:06:28–02:11:53.
84. "Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music 1981 Tony Awards," *YouTube*, April 14, 2010, https://youtu.be/rE3qkz85ctQ.
85. Charlie Smalls' "If You Believe" from the original Broadway score was retitled "Believe in Yourself" on *The Wiz* soundtrack.
86. Jeanine Basinger, *The Movie Musical!* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 577.
87. Basinger, *The Movie Musical!*, 577; Charlie Smalls, *The Wiz: The Super Soul Musical* (New York: Atlantic Records, 1992) [CD].
88. *The Wiz*, directed by Sidney Lumet (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2017) [DVD].
89. Horne is briefly seen early in the film controlling the tornado in the snowstorm that transports Dorothy to Oz.
90. *The Wiz*, directed by Sidney Lumet (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2017)[DVD].
91. *The Wiz*.
92. "Diana Ross Stars in *The Wiz*," *Ebony*, November 1978, 114.
93. "Diana Ross Stars in *The Wiz*," 114–116.
94. Dyer, *In the Space of a Song*, 116.
95. Footage available from Randy Slovacek, "Lena Horne—Kennedy Center Honors," *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tknMjEazRtI. Accessed December 4, 2019.
96. Slovacek, "Lena Horne—Kennedy Center Honors."

## CHAPTER 9

# "I'D DO ANYTHING" *OR* EXPORT STRATEGIES FOR A CULTURALLY SPECIFIC PRODUCT

## *Dubbing, Subtitling, and Cutting the Hollywood Musical for the German-Austrian Market*

OLAF JUBIN

## Preamble: The US Majors and the German-Language Box Office

From the late 1940s onward, the previously recorded earnings of the American film industry were affected by two factors. On the one hand, the average cost for a Hollywood film increased to a staggering $3 million,[1] while on the other hand, in the home market television became a serious competitor; in the United States, audience figures dwindled and decreased to an alarming low in the 1950s.[2] As a result, distributing films abroad was no longer simply a way of optimizing profit; it now often tipped the scales between making or losing money.

At a time when the number of US cinemagoers dropped by 50 percent, it rose in West Germany: in 1956, their most successful year, German cinemas sold 817 million tickets, nearly one-third the level of their American counterparts.[3] Before the start of World War II, the German-Austrian film territory[4] had been the most lucrative of all foreign markets for Hollywood movies, according to Oscar-winning screenwriter Donald Ogden Stewart (*The Philadelphia Story*, 1940).[5] It had been closed off for distributors from abroad for nearly a decade when the monetary reform of 1948 and the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949 cleared the way for American companies to re-enter it.[6] They soon started to flood German and Austrian cinemas with their old and current releases, hoping to establish themselves as market leaders. The conditions to do so were very favorable for the US majors—no other film industry had their financial strength, business acumen, or back catalog.

## Distribution Schedules

In their archives, the American distributors possessed hundreds of movies that had not been released in German-speaking countries. The choice regarding which of these to bring into local cinemas was taken along clear lines: the studios at first exported family films (like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937; *The Wizard of Oz*, 1939; feature-length comedies with Laurel and Hardy) or screen works closely related to the European stage, such as Ernst Lubitsch's *The Merry Widow* (1934) and Julien Duvivier's *The Great Waltz* (1938; a biopic of Johann Strauss II).

Among the earliest releases in the British and American sectors were also movies that showcased each studio's biggest star: Paramount presented Bing Crosby in *Holiday Inn* (1942) as well as in the Oscar-winning *Going My Way* (1944) and its sequel *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945; costarring Ingrid Bergman). Universal tried to acquaint audiences with Deanna Durbin (*It Started with Eve*, 1941; and *His Butler's Sister*, 1943); after all, she had saved the studio from bankruptcy.[7] Twentieth Century–Fox and Columbia took a chance on Rita Hayworth (*My Gal Sal*, 1942; *You Were Never Lovelier*, 1942). The films with the "sex goddess"[8] featured numbers that—similar to the ones in *Ziegfeld Girl* (1941, like all of the films above, imported in 1948)—resembled the ones in the German UFA[9] productions and often were even more elaborate. However, none of these found particular favor with the war-weary population.[10]

The wave of belated US premieres hit a high in the years 1950 and 1951, before it ebbed away rather quickly at the end of 1952. Among the forty-nine movies that had been shot in the 1940s but reached screens in German-language countries in the early 1950s were several Disney cartoons (*Pinocchio*, 1940; *Dumbo*, 1941), films in a revue format (*Ziegfeld Follies*, 1946), works that resembled European operettas (*Northwest Outpost*, 1947), and movies that took place in either Germany or Austria (*The Emperor Waltz*, 1948).

By 1953, the changed conditions of the home market forced the US distributors to alter their export strategies—thereafter, they mainly released abroad those productions which had just been completed in order to maximize profits during the current business year. There was only one major exception to this distribution policy: whenever an actor gained (new) popularity, the American studios tried to cash in on his or her newfound stardom in Germany and Austria by importing some of his or her older movies.[11]

Although there were significantly more US films on offer, local cinemas responded to audience demand by increasing their bookings of German-language movies beginning with the 1951/1952 cinematic season; as a consequence, the US distributors immediately accrued their first losses.[12] In 1954, American films no longer dominated: nearly half of all the works shown in local movie houses (45.9%) were of German or Austrian origin; they would remain the undisputed market leader until the late 1960s. According to Martin Loiperdinger, this constituted a remarkable exception with regard to the operation of the US film industry abroad:

> Globally, the share of Hollywood films scheduled in foreign cinemas is estimated to be 65%. In West Germany, Hollywood films barely manage half of that, namely 30%. As an export market, the country ranks second only after Great Britain, so Hollywood fares decidedly badly here.[13]

Thus, only 13 percent of the films in the Top Ten during the 1950s were made in the United States, whereas German-language productions claim 64 percent; even the most successful US release of that decade—Fred Zinnemann's *From Here to Eternity* (1953)—was seen by fewer than 4 million people, not even one-fifth of the audience attracted by *Schwarzwaldmädel/The Black Forest Girl* (1950, directed by Hans Deppe).[14]

Indeed, local audiences turned out to be difficult customers, stubbornly resisting the allure of Hollywood movies because they preferred movie fare that adhered to storytelling devices they were used to. Genres that were considered "typically American" like the Western and the musical had an especially difficult time in German and Austrian picture houses.[15]

Foreign markets often rejected the US musical, yet the two European countries posed a particular problem. German-language revue films—like other genres in the immediate postwar years, most strikingly the *Heimatfilm*—offered escapist content and modeled themselves on the UFA movies made during the 1930s and World War II. This development was aided and reinforced by the fact that many stars of the Third Reich, such as Marika Rökk, Zarah Leander, Willy Fritsch, or Grethe Weiser, and the men who had directed them (e.g., Georg Jacoby and Wolfgang Liebeneiner) remained fixtures in the German-language film industry and thus provided a clear continuity. In the late

**Table 9.1 Films Shown in West German Cinemas, 1948–1953**[a]

| | Cinematic Season | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Country of Origin | 1948/49 | 1949/50 | 1950/51 | 1951/52 | 1952/53 |
| United States | 64 | 145 | 202 | 226 | 227 |
| West Germany | 33 | 65 | 75 | 65 | 78 |
| German re-releases | 125 | 132 | 174 | 42 | 21 |
| Other | 118 | 164 | 158 | 149 | 112 |
| Total | 340 | 506 | 609 | 482 | 438 |

[a] Spitzenorganisation der Filmwirtschaft, ed., *Filmstatisches Jahrbuch 1954–1955* (Wiesbaden: SPIO, 1955), 85.

1940 and early 1950s, about a third of all German-language movies in the Top Ten were remakes of releases from the 1930s,[16] which constituted another link to the recent past.

This tendency of German and Austrian revue films to offer "pure entertainment" thus collided with the inclination of the Hollywood musical in the 1950s to question the traditional happy ending and to hint at bitter truths behind the shiny façade.[17] Yet local audiences—unfamiliar with the genre's historical development—had no way of appreciating or even understanding such novelties; it therefore opted for the familiar in the form of German-language releases, which were simpler, less stylized—there is hardly any film of that decade that features singing or dancing outside of a backstage context—and also were not based on stage successes that the German and Austrian audiences did not know. Basically, the Hollywood musical veered too far away from the rigid norms that local movies had established and reinforced ever since the arrival of sound. Even Oscar-garlanded films had a hard time finding an audience;[18] Vincente Minnelli's *Gigi* (1958) is a typical example, ranking 114 in the list of most successful films of 1959.[19]

In addition, the luminaries of the American musical were not box-office draws in the two European countries, as neither those who had been showcased on US screens for nearly twenty years (such as Bing Crosby or Fred Astaire) nor those whose careers had been carefully built up by their studio (such as Judy Garland or Jane Powell) were household names[20]—in stark contrast to the homegrown stars.

## The Empire Strikes Back

Yet for the reasons detailed above, the American distributors did not want to content themselves with a minor share of the rapidly expanding German-language box office, so they decided to fight back. Those movies that were regarded as "too foreign" for national viewers were modified to become "less American."[21]

Before reaching German and Austrian cinemas, film musicals were often subjected to drastic changes, as some had individual numbers or whole sections removed in order to fit the German-language "norm." Occasionally, these changes were already indicated in the radically altered release titles—in certain cases the German title bears absolutely no resemblance to the English original. Table 9.2 includes a selection of the most striking examples.

It needs to be stressed that the decision of the US majors to "adapt" their offerings to fit in with the audience's taste was entirely based on commercial considerations—it was done in the hope of optimizing or at least improving the chances for a box-office hit. Their revisions ranged from the careless or incompetent to the intentionally misleading or false. In spite of these drastic measures—some may argue precisely *because* of them—the genre did not become any more popular, so ever since the late 1940s the film musical has had a difficult time finding an audience in Germany and Austria.

### Table 9.2 Most Bizarre German-Release Titles

| Original Title/Year of Production | German Title/Year of Import | Translation of German Title |
|---|---|---|
| *My Favorite Spy* (1942) | *Spione, Liebe und die Feuerwehr* (1952) | Spies, Love and the Fire Brigade |
| *The Time, the Place and the Girl* (1946) | *Der Himmel voller Geigen/Krieg nach Noten* (1951) | A Heaven Full of Violins/War Set to Music |
| *Northwest Outpost* (1947) | *Ich kann mein Herz nur einmal verschenken/Leise spielt die Balalaika* (1951) | I Can Give Away My Heart Only Once/The Balalaika Plays Softly |
| *This Time for Keeps* (1947) | *Bezaubernde Lippen* (1954) | Enticing Lips |
| *Welcome Stranger* (1947) | *Mit Gesang geht alles besser* (1949) | Everything Goes Better with a Song |
| *Paleface* (1948) | *Sein Engel mit den zwei Pistolen* (1950) | His Angel with the Two Colts |
| *Two Weeks with Love* (1950) | *Einmal eine Dame sein* (1953) | Once a Lady |
| *Lovely to Look At* (1952) | *Männer machen Mode* (1953) | Men Creating Fashion |
| *Calamity Jane* (1953) | *Schwere Colts in zarter Hand* (1963) | Heavy Colts in Tender Hands |
| *Let's Do It Again* (1953) | *Diese Frau vergißt man nicht* (1954) | This Woman Is Unforgettable |
| *The Stars Are Singing* (1953) | *Ein Lied, ein Kuß, ein Mädel* (1954) | A Song, a Kiss, a Gal |
| *Tonight We Sing* (1953) | *Götter ohne Maske* (1953) | Gods without a Mask |
| *Torch Song* (1953) | *Herzen im Fieber* (1954) | Feverish Hearts |
| *There's No Business Like Showbusiness* (1954) | *Rhythmus im Blut* (1955) | Rhythm in the Blood |
| *Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (1955) | *So liebt man in Paris* (1956) | That's How They Love in Paris! |
| *Young at Heart* (1955) | *Man soll nicht mit der Liebe spielen* (1962) | Don't Fool Around with Love! |
| *The Best Things in Life Are Free* (1956) | *Fanfaren der Freude* (1956) | Fanfares of Joy |
| *Bundle of Joy* (1956) | *Na, na, Fräulein Mutti* (1958) | Tsk, Tsk, Miss Mommy |
| *Beau James* (1957) | *Schöne Frauen, harte Dollars* (1957) | Beautiful Women, Hard Cash |
| *The Joker Is Wild* (1957) | *Schicksalsmelodie* (1958) | Melody of Fate |
| *This Could Be the Night* (1957) | *Kein Platz für feine Damen* (1958) | No Place for Ladies of Refinement |
| *Flower Drum Song* (1961) | *Mandelaugen und Lotusblüten* (1962) | Almond Eyes and Lotus Blossoms |

The following will explore in detail how the Hollywood musical was prepared for German-language moviegoers. There were three main strategies used by the US majors:

1. shortening the films;
2. dubbing the musical numbers; and
3. subtitling the songs (a) in rhyme or (b) in prose

I will outline these strategies in the chronological order of the time they were prevalent. However, because those practices also coexisted for several decades and to a certain degree overlapped, forward and backward movement in time will be inevitable.

For more than three decades, local branches of the US distributors regularly resorted to cutting their releases; that practice started when the Hollywood majors re-entered the German-language film market in 1948 and lasted until the end of the 1970s. Another approach that was adopted straightaway, especially with films intended for the whole family, was dubbing musical numbers into German. In the 1950s and 1960s, this time-consuming and costly method was reserved for the most prestigious and expensive of Hollywood releases; nowadays, only cartoon musicals and other family fare will be dubbed in their entirety.

Subtitling songs on the other hand was tried from 1950 onward; at first, German translators opted for captions in rhyme. This unusual translation technique, occasionally applied in the 1950s, was abandoned once subtitling in prose was introduced in the early 1970s. Today, most film musicals released in German and Austrian cinemas have their musical numbers subtitled as near to verbatim as possible.

In addition, four case studies (of Disney's film output in Germany/Austria and of the three movies *Cover Girl*, *Two Girls and a Sailor*, and *Dangerous When Wet*) will highlight not only how the dubbing of film musicals has changed over the decades, but also the specific sensitivities of local audiences and the cultural barriers facing the Hollywood musical.

## STRATEGY 1: SHORTENING THE PRODUCT—EDITING OUT MUSICAL NUMBERS

One way in which the distributors tried to make their films more easily consumable for German-language audiences was to simply delete whole musical sequences. This was supposed to help in two ways: firstly, by adapting the imported works more closely to local viewing habits. For instance, since Germans and Austrians were not familiar with the concept of non-diegetic numbers, they were kept to a minimum. The modified release prints also focused more exclusively on the movie's stars—their main selling point—by reducing the screen time of minor characters. Secondly, the cuts rendered the movies less complex by omitting "extraneous" musical interludes or whole subplots.

In the 1960s, the cultural discourse in German-language countries started to recognize the artistic values of Hollywood entertainment; subsequently, it introduced the concept of "authenticity" as a key factor in preparing a film for the local market,[22] but this debate made an effect on distributors only from the 1980s onward. In the previous three decades, it was customary to delete musical numbers from German-language prints; the percentage of films that between 1947 and 1979 were shortened for German or Austrian cinemas is roughly a quarter of all imports, before the number drops significantly in the 1980s (see Table 9.3).

Especially those musicals with an "excessive" running time—anything above 90 minutes—were likely to be treated to this radical interference, partly so that local cinema owners would not lose one film showing a day: fifty-nine of the shortened films are longer than 110 minutes in their original version, while thirteen pass the 2.5-hour mark.[23]

In the first four years after re-entering the German-language market (1947–1950), the US distributors cut ten of their thirty-seven offerings (c. 27%), removing between 8 (*My Gal Sal*, 1942) and 60 minutes (*The Great Ziegfeld*, 1936) of material; on average, the films were shortened by 18 minutes. During the following decade, it was mainly Broadway adaptations and thus prestige productions that saw the US majors reaching for the scissors. The distributors were well aware that local audiences were unlikely to be familiar with the source material and consequently unlikely to notice if a number of songs were missing. The stage-to-screen transfers thus truncated include *Carousel* (1956, 17 min.) and *South Pacific* (1958, 23 min.), with *The King and I* (1956) losing all of its musical numbers except for the "March of the Siamese Children."[24]

In the 1960s, the US majors had less and less choice when putting together their international releases: to keep losses to a minimum, they now even included musicals that had already flopped in the North American market. Yet in an attempt to reduce the dubbing costs for these financial disappointments, they were severely cut—on average, box-office duds such as *Camelot* (1967), *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968), *Sweet Charity* (1969), and *Paint Your Wagon* (1969) lost 25 minutes of their score.[25] The last of these was edited so rigorously that it was hardly recognizable as a musical. Others were treated even worse: the distributor of *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying*

**Table 9.3 Percentage of Imported Musicals Cut for the German/Austrian Market[a]**

| | Decade of German/Austrian Distribution | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Musicals | 1940s/50s | 1960s | 1970s | 1980s |
| Imported | 208 | 89 | 72 | 74 |
| Shortened | 51 | 24 | 16 | 3 |
| Percentage | 24.5% | 26.9% | 22.2% | 4.3% |

[a] Figures taken from Olaf Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung. Aufbereitung und Rezeption des Hollywood Musicals* (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1995), 493

(1967) removed *every single one* of its ten songs, reducing its running time from 121 to 95 minutes.[26] In spite of this radical treatment, the film still failed to find an audience.

Something similar had happened only once before, if for entirely different reasons: in 1947, the three songs performed by Bing Crosby in *The Bells of St. Mary's* were deleted, because the film company feared the predominantly Catholic audiences in Germany and Austria would object to religious figures singing worldly songs.[27] Extreme measures such as these, however, are no longer taken; in the last thirty years, not one Hollywood musical has been shortened for its cinematic release in German-language territories.

## Strategy 2: Dubbing a Film Musical—General Considerations

Dubbing as a form of translation is subject to the same set of restrictions pertaining to any act of substituting one language for another—for a variety of reasons an absolutely authentic translation is impossible. These include the fact that any sign system merely *describes* the things it references without actually *replacing* them.[28] Thus, every single word is open to interpretation, which can vary from person to person and culture to culture. As Jiří Levý notes, every translation into German (or any other language) is also determined historically, firstly, by interpreting the text based on the aesthetic values of the time and place of its translation.[29] Secondly, the personal style of the translator expresses an understanding of his or her profession that is also indicative of a time-dependent norm.[30] Finally, the translator has to keep in mind the composition and educational level of the target demographic, which varies over time.

Dubbing into German had already become the norm for imported movies in the 1930s. That practice simply continued after 1945, although professional dubbing standards have changed noticeably over the decades, for instance regarding the synchronicity between the lip movements on screen and the speech of the dubbing actor. Matching the two was absolutely mandatory in the 1950s and 1960s;[31] in the following decade as a way of saving time, it was already less strictly adhered to,[32] while in the last thirty years this criterion has lost even more of its purchase.

As Wilfried Adam points out, there wasn't much financial risk involved in releasing a foreign movie on the German-language market in the 1950s: "Including costs for dubbing and release prints an imported film requires from the distributor an initial investment of 200,000 Deutschmarks at the most. Yet this sum will always be recouped."[33]

The costs for dubbing a movie depend on four main factors:

1. the complexity of the dialogue;
2. the length of the movie;
3. the idiosyncrasies of language and cultural background; and
4. the number of actors to be dubbed.[34]

If they are to be dubbed in their entirety, however, film musicals necessitate another step: re-recording the songs. Until the recent advances in recording technology, this also meant re-recording the orchestra tracks. Thus, dubbing the songs of an imported movie significantly increased the overall expenditure of the distributor, which may explain why this approach was mostly chosen for family films and prospective box-office successes.

From the mid-1950s onward, the US majors preferred to dub only the dialogue of Hollywood musicals, but to leave the musical numbers in the original, without even the additional help of subtitles. Such a mixed-method approach was regularly chosen when the stars of the movie were also knows as singers (such as Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Mario Lanza, Marilyn Monroe, and Elvis Presley[35]) or when their voice was part of their comic persona (Jerry Lewis). Oftentimes, these songs were presented in diegetic setups, like nightclub acts or similar stage performances, and thus seemingly didn't need further explanation. This business strategy only changed in the 1960s when the first Hollywood musicals succeeded at the German box office.

Here, another factor comes into play: not every actor is good at dubbing. Only a few have the talent and the experience to work quickly (thereby saving money and time),[36] and so many foreign actors consistently have one and the same German dubbing voice. This problem was exacerbated when it came to dubbing *songs*; until the German/Austrian musical theater boom of the late 1980s improved the institutional training of performers with special skills in singing and dancing, the local pool of qualified *singing* actors was extremely limited. In the 1950s, Georg Thomalla dubbed practically all the major comedians of the Hollywood musical (such as Bob Hope, Danny Kaye, and Red Skelton). In the second half of the 1960s, Monika Dahlberg was regularly hired to perform the songs of those actresses who had a light soprano—what in Germany and Austria would have been called an "operetta voice." Thus, she can be heard emanating from Julie Andrews in *Mary Poppins* (1964), Audrey Hepburn (herself dubbed by Marni Nixon) in *My Fair Lady* (1964),[37] and Samantha Eggar (herself dubbed by Diana Lee) in *Doctor Dolittle* (1967). Twenty years later, Joachim Kemmer was not only hired to speak and sing for Albert Finney in *Annie* (1982) but also to interpret the roles of Sebastian in the German dubbing of *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Lumière in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Jafar in *Aladdin* (1992), and Rafiki in *The Lion King* (1994). All three examples from this paragraph show how the dubbing process reduced the variety of the voices, timbres, and talents employed in the originals to a mere few alternatives.

In this context it is remarkable that in 1959, one Hollywood star—although not fluent in German—did his own singing for a local release print. Danny Kaye, who usually was also dubbed by the ubiquitous Georg Thomalla, traveled to West Berlin and re-recorded all of his songs for *The Five Pennies* (Thomalla still covered the speaking parts of the film). This rare instance[38] has been commemorated by a photograph that shows the comedian at work with film producer Wenzel Lüdecke in the studio of the Berliner Synchron Wenzel Lüdecke, the biggest and most respected dubbing company founded during the postwar era.[39]

**FIGURE 9.1** Monika Dahlberg, during the 1960s the most widely-used singing voice for the dubbing of Hollywood musicals into German. Photo provided by the author.

The always-pertinent question of whether the dubbing should imply that the script had been conceived in German, even though the settings, clothes, traffic signs, etc. on screen persistently prove this not to have been the case,[40] was unconditionally answered in the affirmative by the whole dubbing industry in the early 1950s. Many musicals that back then were prepared for the German-language market evidence a tendency to substitute anything that might reveal a movie's country of origin with German/Austrian "equivalents." This includes names—*My Sister Eileen* (1955) was turned into *Meine Schwester Ellen*—as well as terms such as "Sergeant" (dubbed as "Wachtmeister") or "Broadway show" (dubbed as "revue"). *Two Weeks with Love* (1950) is set in the Catskills, which in the German version became "Oberuntertalstein."[41] Such compulsive adjustments gained notoriety as "Allemanitis"; they basically ran counter to the main aim of the dubbing process: “These cases did not use translation as a means to build bridges which would allow the rapprochement between various countries with different languages and cultures—instead they instrumentalize translation in order to colonize foreign nations on German screens.”[42]

Taking their first steps onto the German/Austrian market, all US distributors tried out dubbing a film’s musical numbers in an obvious attempt to give the local audience what it was used to: cinema releases in which everyone spoke and sang German. Not surprisingly, the American majors were mainly willing to pay for an all-inclusive German version if the respective films had already been embraced by US audiences, so this particular method of translation was reserved for (old and new) hits such as *Music for Millions* (US release: 1944; German/Austrian release: 1949), *Top Hat* (1935/1950),[43] *Three Little Words* (1950/1951), *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952/1953), *The Band Wagon* (1953/1954), and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954/1955). Yet when the increased expenses did not result in increased box-office returns, the Americans abandoned that approach; it was only taken up again in the 1960s, once a number of Hollywood musicals entered the German/Austrian cinema charts, and the US majors had begun to finance big-budget extravaganzas for the whole family.

Following in the wake of the surprise success of *West Side Story* (1961) among European cinemagoers, other big-budget Hollywood releases were also given this expensive treatment: *Flower Drum Song* (1961); *My Fair Lady* and *Mary Poppins* (both 1964); *The Sound of Music* (1965); *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966); *Camelot*, *Doctor Dolittle*, *Half a Sixpence*, and *The Happiest Millionaire* (all 1967); and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and *Oliver!* (both 1968). Yet of this lineup, only *My Fair Lady* and *Mary Poppins* found favor with local audiences; all other releases were resounding flops.[44]

Since then, the only other two musicals not expressly produced for children to have their songs dubbed into German were *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (2004). This decision may have been influenced by the fact that their respective stage versions had been long-running hits; moreover, in both cases there also already existed a German translation of the songs that could be used.[45] In other words, complete dubbings nowadays are to be found only in family films.[46]

## CASE STUDY 1: DISNEY RELEASES 1950–2019

Since small children either cannot read at all or cannot read fast enough for subtitles, movie musicals for the whole family have always been completely dubbed, and so ever since their first animated feature film, the Walt Disney Company has commissioned translations of the songs in their movies. This started with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), whose first German dubbing was completed as early as 1938 in Amsterdam, using several actors who had fled the Nazis; it was intended for distribution in Austria and Switzerland, but was only released in cinemas in 1948 (premiering in Vienna) and 1950 (in Germany).[47] Because of its long tradition in the field, it is instructive to explore how the company's approach to dubbing has changed over the last eighty years.

Disney films were among the very first imports after 1945 and were immediately very popular with German and Austrian cinemagoers. Before the translation and rerecording of their songs was entrusted—for nearly two decades—to composer and dubbing author Heinrich Riethmüller, various translators were responsible for the German-language releases. In chronological order, these were Christine Lembach (*Cinderella*, 1950; *Peter Pan*, 1953), Eva Maria Brock (*The Lady and the Tramp*, 1955) and Richard Busch (*Sleeping Beauty*, 1959).

The quality of the individual translation depends largely on the skills of whoever provided the German lyrics. The ones in *Peter Pan*, for instance, at times are difficult to match with the English original,[48] which already indicates that Lembach's main concern was not staying close to the content of Sammy Cahn's lyrics. In contrast, the German lyrics of *Sleeping Beauty* mostly remain true to the original verses, but cannot match their stylistic elegance, as Busch needs to resort to unclean rhymes, inversions, and ellipses. His choice of words is also less varied, and at times he leaves out rhymes altogether.[49] Sleeping Beauty's solo "I Wonder" repeatedly hints at the princess's awakening sexuality, but the German version is more conservative: it underlines that any future relationship cannot be initiated by Aurora herself—all she can do is wait until somebody "comes a-wooing."[50] This shift of emphasis implies that in the late 1950s there was a consensus in German society and thus also in the German dubbing industry that "adult" subjects such as love needed to be downplayed in films aimed at children.[51]

The 1960s brought two of the most famous and popular of all German dubbings, which manage either to render the original songs with elegance and faithfulness (*Mary Poppins*, 1964)[52] or to perfectly capture the *Zeitgeist* of the original film (*The Jungle Book*, 1967).[53]

It is rare for a completely new dubbing of a musical to be commissioned because rerecording the songs in German is expensive. *The Jungle Book*, however, turned out to be the most successful film ever shown in German-language cinemas, selling roughly 27 million tickets in its original cinematic run (1968) and three re-releases (1979, 1987, and 1993),[54] not least because of its brilliant, witty use of conversational German. Disney was so enamored with the hip German translation by Heinrich Riethmüller, supervisor of the classy dubbing,[55] that the company asked him to rework six earlier classics (*Snow White*, *Pinocchio*, *Dumbo*, *Bambi*, *Lady and the Tramp*, and *101 Dalmatians*) before they were brought back to German and Austrian screens in the 1970s and 1980s. Table 9.4 lists the years of the various dubbing versions.[56]

It is rumored that all German-language versions ever produced for Disney are archived in London and Burbank, but so far the corporation has seized the opportunity offered by Blu-ray to present films in various formats only once:[57] the 2013 home entertainment release of *The Little Mermaid* (1989) includes both the original 1990 German version and the one commissioned for the 1998 cinematic re-release, because customers

**Table 9.4 Disney Movies Dubbed More than Once**

| Film | 1st Dubbing | 2nd Dubbing | 3rd Dubbing |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) | 1938 | 1966 | 1994[a] |
| *Pinocchio* (1940) | 1951 | 1973 | – |
| *Dumbo* (1941) | 1952 | 1976 | – |
| *Bambi* (1942) | 1950 | 1973 | – |
| *Lady and the Tramp* (1955) | 1956 | 1975 | – |
| *101 Dalmatians* (1961) | 1961 | 1980 | – |
| *The Little Mermaid* (1989) | 1990 | 1998 | – |

[a] This version, while using different dubbing actors, actually combines bits of the previous two dubbings, especially in the German lyrics.

complained so vehemently about the second dubbing that Disney finally caved in.[58] Yet traces of those other earlier versions still remain, in the form of old records, both on 33⅓ rpm albums and 45 rpm singles.[59]

The company treated its (potential) box-office hits with great care, but what about movies that had already flopped stateside? The ignominious fate suffered by *The Happiest Millionaire* (1967) offers some clues since the box-office disaster was subjected to drastic cuts before it was brought into German and Austrian cinemas: six numbers were removed ("Are We Dancing," "I Believe in This Country," "Watch Your Footwork," "I'll Always Be Irish," "When a Man Has a Daughter," and "La Belle Fille d'Amour") and another two ("Bye Yum Pum Pum" and "Detroit") were shortened.

Cutting films down to a length more "suitable" for children was also practiced in the 1970s, with the two Disney films to combine live action with animated sequences, *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1971) and *Pete's Dragon* (1978). Both also got entirely new German titles: the former was called *Die tollkühne Hexe in ihrem fliegenden Bett/The Daredevil Witch in Her Flying Bed*, while the latter became known as *Elliot, das Schmunzelmonster/Elliot, the Smiling Monster*. However, the way these two films were cut varied greatly: *Bedknobs* lost nearly 20 minutes,[60] but this time not only the songs were affected[61] since the German version also removed all references to the time the film is set (1940) as well as all scenes involving the Deutsche Wehrmacht and the English homeguard. In the early 1970s, to shy away from scenes depicting Nazis and World War II was rare for a German cinematic release; in this instance, the cuts presumably were meant to keep the film "child-appropriate"—as well as to spare the children's parents awkward questions.

The case of *Pete's Dragon* is rather different: for once, it was mainly dialogue scenes that were edited out. Only one song ("The Happiest Home in These Hills") was deleted, while "Candle on the Water" was moved from the second half of the film to the opening titles, which allowed the distributor to cut the whole sequence of Helen Reddy singing the Oscar-nominated ballad on top of the lighthouse. Tellingly, in Germany and Austria both films are still only available on DVD or Blu-ray in their altered forms; neither has ever been restored to its original length.[62]

In the 1970s, the studio also started to contract famous singers for individual movies: Wencke Myhre and Katja Ebstein, both primarily known as "Schlagersänger"[63] but more versatile than this reputation might suggest, were hired to perform the songs in *The Rescuers* (1977) and *Pete's Dragon* (1978), respectively, with Ebstein dubbing for Helen Reddy.

A comparison between the English and German lyrics for "The Beautiful Briny" (from *Bedknobs*) can serve as an indication of which stylistic elements were deemed the most important to maintain in careful translations.[64] Eberhard Cronshagen renders every single rhyme of the Sherman Brothers; yet he does not strive to replicate the song's figures of sound, such as assonances or alliterations. A comparable focus is noticeable in the German version of *Pete's Dragon*—close adherence to the general rhyme scheme, with a concurrent loss of the original's variety of expression and thus wealth of detail.[65]

Throughout the decades from the 1960s to the early 1990s, Disney musicals usually arrived in German and Austrian cinemas about a year after their US release, which allowed plenty of time for a diligent dubbing. That release pattern changed in the mid-1990s: from *The Lion King* (1994) onward, all of the studio's animated features took less than six months to arrive in German-language territories.[66] In the late 2000s, the Internet and the threat of video piracy led to another adjustment: starting with *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), Disney cartoons have been day-and-date releases, that is, they arrive in cinemas all around the world on the same day,[67] putting more pressure on the individuals responsible for foreign-language versions.

Considering that these limitations did not yet apply during the so-called Disney Renaissance (1989–1999), it is both surprising and disappointing that their German versions regularly lack the precision and ingenuity of the brilliant originals. This is particularly noticeable when it comes to the songs written by Howard Ashman. Here, the language of the translations is less subtle and at times unnecessarily coarse or vague; the translators have to fall back on contractions or inversions and more than once disregard prosody by stretching syllables over several notes or by violating the meter, that is, by disregarding the correct pronunciation of the word in order to follow the melodic line.[68]

Disney's only live-action musical of the 1990s, on the other hand, proved that like the other US majors, the company was not willing to throw good money after bad: once *Newsies* (1992) had been rejected by US cinemagoers, the distributor decided not to waste money on a careful dubbing—the German lyrics sound as if they never progressed beyond a first draft.[69] Yet even this sloppy translation, a clear indicator of indifference, shows that by the time of the movie's German release the dubbing industry had moved away from maintaining the basic form of a musical number—so important in the immediate postwar period—toward giving precedence to an authentic rendering of a song's content. That approach has only become further entrenched in the last few years, as two brief examples from Disney's phenomenally popular *Frozen* will illustrate.

The song title of "Do You Wanna Build a Snowman?" has been translated verbatim as "Willst du einen Schneemann bauen?" yet in the German version the emphasis of music and lyrics do not coincide. The original matches words and melody perfectly ("do you **wan**na build a **snow**man"), but the translation has to go against what would be the natural line reading ("Willst du einen **Schnee**mann bauen?") by forcefully altering the emphasis to "Willst du **ei**nen Schneemann **bau**en?"

Similar observations can be made when comparing the first eight lines of the original and the German version of the Oscar-winning "Let It Go."[70] In order to render the content of Elsa's solo as detailed as possible, the German version ignores the rhymes in lines 1/2, 3/5, and 7/8. The word "Königreich" not only is stretched over two notes ("Königrei-eich"), it also is mispronounced with an incorrect syllabic stress ("Königr**eich**," instead of "**Kö**nigreich"), as are "Königin" and "versucht" in the succeeding lines. Finally, mimicking the original sentence structure in line 8, the translation sounds stilted as the two parts normally would be reversed by a native speaker. So while the German text works hard to keep all the details of the original, it "lets go" of linguistic correctness and stylistic elegance.

This signifies a major shift in the professional understanding of what constitutes an accomplished dubbing: strict adherence to certain stylistic means of lyric-writing (first and foremost, rhyming) has given way to utter faithfulness to the lyrics' *content*—at times, to the detriment of the form of the German version. Yet although the translation of "Let It Go" is seriously flawed, in Germany and Austria it nonetheless rivals the popularity of the original in the United States. That seems to suggest that the current method of favoring content over form agrees at least with German-language audiences.

## STRATEGY 3A: SUBTITLING IN RHYMES; CASE STUDY 2: "WHO'S COMPLAINING"

It may seem strange to readers from countries where releasing a foreign film with subtitles is the norm, but for decades there were no attempts to make the songs of a musical understandable for German-language audiences by subtitling them in prose. Dubbing companies at first opted for rhymed subtitles if they resorted to subtitling at all.

Occasionally, there were cases when the traditional position and color of these captions—at the bottom of the screen in white—became a problem: in *Anything Goes/ Broadway Zauber*[71] (1956), Bing Crosby and Donald O'Connor perform the song "A Second-Hand Turban and a Crystal Ball" during a banquet, and the gleaming light tablecloths render the projected translations more or less unreadable.

In general, musicals rarely violated the standards imposed by the "Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft" (FSK). During the 1940s and 1950s, the German film rating board, a self-appointed guardian of national self-esteem, regularly demanded cuts, especially of references to fascism and scenes depicting Germany's role in World War II, before it allowed films to be released in German cinemas.[72] Between 1945 and 1955, nearly every fifth imported film was "neutered" in this way, often with the help of drastic cuts.[73]

While those demands grew less and less frequent in the following decades, at least one Hollywood musical—*Cover Girl* (1944)—was affected by this policy, which was never seriously questioned or opposed by US distributors. They rather welcomed any advice on how their product may find more favor with the German-language public.

*Cover Girl* was released in the territory of the former enemy in 1950; it was prepared by the Willy Zeyn Film GmbH and was altered by using both deceptive subtitling (of the songs) and dubbing (of the dialogue). The misleading German dialogue deliberately withholds the information that Danny McGuire (played by Gene Kelly) only entertains the troops because an old injury prevents him from joining active service.[74] There is also a number, "Who's Complaining" by Jerome Kern and Ira Gershwin and performed by Phil Silvers, that includes specific references to World War II. It therefore addressed a subject that German-language audiences did not want to be reminded of when *Cover Girl* reached local cinemas. The rhymed subtitles helped avoid any provocation by significantly altering the song's content:[75]

| **German Subtitles [in rhymes]** | **English Translation of the German Subtitles** |
|---|---|
| Mein Fleischer sagt: | My butcher says: |
| Das hab ich nicht. | I don't have this. |
| Mein Krämer sagt | My grocer says |
| das auch. | the same. |
| Ich sage nie, das kann ich nicht. | I never say, I cannot do this. |
| Das ist bei mir nicht Brauch. | That is not my custom. |
| Denn sind die Zeiten | Because even in the worst |
| Noch so schlecht | of times |
| Ich lass mich | I will not |
| nicht verbittern. | become embittered. |
| | |
| Ich amüsier mich schlecht | I'm enjoying myself |
| und recht | after a fashion |
| und bin nicht zu erschüt- | and I cannot be un- |
| tern. | settled. |
| Karotten sind | Carrots are |
| Rationiert | rationed. |
| Der Kaffee ist | Coffee is |
| Ersatz. | ersatz. |
| | |
| Statt Wein wird Fachinger | Instead of wine they serve |
| Serviert | table water. |
| Statt Hasenbraten Katz | Instead of roasted rabbit it's cat. |
| Wir kriegen Ersatz . . . | We get ersatz . . . |
| . . . ob arm oder reich | . . . whether we are poor or rich. |
| Das Einzige , was echt bleibt . . . | The only thing that remains real . . . |
| ist meine Liebe zu Euch. | is my love for you. |

| German Subtitles [in rhymes] cont'd | English Translation of the German Subtitles cont'd |
|---|---|
| Wenn das auf die | If this will continue |
| Dauer so weitergeht | perpetually |
| Wird mein Magen wie | my stomach will become like |
| Der einer Maus | that of a mouse |
| Dem alles Fette widersteht – | who resists all fatty things – |
| Und so sieht mein Tageslauf aus: | and this is my run of the day: |
| | |
| Das Frühstück wird mit | Breakfast is served |
| der Lupe serviert | with a magnifying glass |
| Sowie ich aufgestanden | as soon as I get |
| Bin | up |
| Und für das | And for the little |
| womit das Brötchen geschmiert | that is spread on the bun |
| Entschädigt mich die | I am recompensed for by the |
| Kellnerin | waitress. |
| | |
| Früher fuhr ich ungern | In the past I didn't like taking |
| Strassenbahn. | the tram. |
| Heute ist's mir | Nowadays it's a |
| ein Vergnügen | pleasure |
| Seh' ich die hübsche, kleine | when I see the cute, little |
| Schaffnerin | conductress |
| Sich lässig in den Hüften | nonchalantly sways |
| Wiegen. | her hips. |
| | |
| Und dann im Büro einen | And then at the office it's |
| Brief zu diktieren | such a pleasure |
| Ist ein Vergnügen für sich. | to dictate a letter. |
| Was kann den Mädchen | There is nothing that can |
| schon passieren | happen to the girls |
| Bei so einem Diktator wie | with a dictator like |
| ich (sic!] | me |
| | |
| Doch geh' ich mit meinem | But when my gal and I go |
| Mädchen essen | out to dine |
| Dann hab' ich meinen | then I completely forget |
| Hunger ganz vergessen. | my hunger. |
| Ist das ein Wunder? | Is that any wonder? |
| Ich seh' mich um und fühle mich | I look around and I feel |
| befangen – | self-conscious – |
| Ich frage Sie: | I am asking you: |
| Kann man noch mehr verlangen? | Who could ask for anything more? Who could ask |
| Kann man noch mehr verlangen? | for any-thing more? |

| German Subtitles [in rhymes] cont'd | English Translation of the German Subtitles cont'd |
|---|---|
| Wer beklagt sich?<br>Ich beklag' mich nicht.<br>Ich zeig ein lächelndes Gesicht. | Who's complaining?<br>I'm not complaining.<br>I'm all smiles. |
| *Sind meine Schuhe auch nicht aus Leder*<br>*Hat auch mein Bett keine einzige Feder*<br>*Und sind selbst meine Knie weich –*<br>*Ich fühl' mich reich.* | *My shoes may not be made of leather*<br>*Even if my bed has not a single feather*<br>*And even if I go weak at the knees –*<br>*I feel as if I'm rich.* |
| Nicht fragen,<br>nicht klagen<br>Das Leben ertragen. | Do not ask any questions,<br>do not complain,<br>endure life. |
| *Wir kriegen Ersatz*<br>*Ob arm oder reich.* | *We get ersatz*<br>*whether we are poor or rich.* |
| Das Einzige, was echt bleibt,<br>ist meine Liebe zu Euch. | The only thing that remains real<br>is my love for you. |

Gershwin's text has two main topics: on the one hand it tries to convince cinemagoers with an ironic wink that the rationing enforced by the US government has at least one positive side, as female clothing has also been reduced to its absolute minimum. On the other hand, the song is a typical example for the self-reflexivity of the film musical: it emphasizes that the public can endure anything as long as there is entertainment such as *Cover Girl* ("As long as they don't ration / My passion for you").

The first stanza outlines the general situation: the provision with food items and other goods is problematic, but the reasonable citizen accepts what has been decreed by the politicians ("We must do the task / And it's little enough they ask"). The subtitles modify the singer's attitude toward the sketched-out situation. Whereas the original accepts things that cannot be changed ("For in times like these / Life's no time of ease"), the translation underlines that the character has what it takes to withstand the difficult circumstances ("I never say I cannot do this / That is not my custom," ll. 5–6).

The two versions also differ in their recommended method of bearing the hardships. The English lyrics highlight that the adversities can only be overcome by communal endeavors ("You'll see *we*'ll see this thing through"). This collectivist approach is replaced in the German-release print with individual stoicism: "*I* will not become embittered" (ll. 13–14). As then becomes evident in line 73 ("I feel as if I'm rich"), the German version recommends purposeful optimism ("I'm all smiles," l. 67), not least because a verbatim translation of the line in question ("The sacrifices are few") would have seemed callous and cynical considering the plight of the German population in the years immediately following the end of World War II.

The rationed items have also been tailored to reflect conditions in the defeated country. Phil Silvers longs for luxurious goods ("sirloin") and has to contend himself with homegrown vegetables ("artichokes"), but the subtitles replace these with less fancy desires: "Instead of wine they serve table water / Instead of roasted rabbit, it's cat," ll. 19–21) since even the most basic of foods ("all fatty things," l. 30) is unavailable.

In this context, the German text avoids all references as to *why* goods are scarce. Ira Gershwin links this to the US war effort ("campaigning"), which necessitates providing for the troops stationed and fighting abroad ("goods fly out"). Other references to the ongoing military conflict include terms such as "Axis' trickery": and "civilians." That all of these allusions to current events have been eliminated in the German subtitles shows a clear effort to sidestep unpleasant truths, since the local audiences did not want to be reminded of who was responsible for their dire straits ("Do not ask any questions," l. 74).

Gershwin isn't that coy; he even names the adversary. It is telling how these specific lines ("I'll feed myself on artichokes / Until that Nazi Party chokes") have been substituted in the German version: "We get ersatz . . . / . . . whether we are rich or poor" (ll. 22–23). This bit of information was so important to the author who drew up the subtitles that he or she repeated them in lines 77–78, insisting to the audience that the misery is the same for everyone and that nobody can count on special treatment. The second direct allusion to the Third Reich is also neutralized: whereas for Americans, the notion of a "dictator" inevitably conjured up associations with Hitler, German audiences only knew him as "der Führer," so that even a verbatim translation of the term could not bring back memories which were best forgotten.

The English original not only offers a political commentary, it also serves as justification for the entertainment needs of the audience. However, the subtitles adjust the content to the point where it can leave the local cinemagoers with explicit instructions: "Do not ask any questions / Do not complain / Endure life" (ll. 74–76). This request to persevere was a message that Germans could accept, not least because their situation left them hardly any other choice than to condone such a tenet.

While this censorious use of rhyming subtitles is the exception, the method as such also was rarely used; it can only be found in the German versions of several films released in the mid-1950s such as *White Christmas* (1954), *Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (1955), and *Anything Goes* (1956). Rhymed captions became uncommon by the end of that decade; the 1960s were dominated by musicals whose songs were dubbed into German, and from the 1970s onward verbatim subtitles became the norm.

Rhymed subtitles were brought back only occasionally in the following four decades: twice in the 1970s (for *Lost Horizon*, 1973;[76] and *The Slipper and the Rose*, 1976) and twice in the 1980s—sensibly handled in the case of the 1989 German (television) premiere of *Pennies from Heaven* (1981)[77] and with disastrous consequences for *Yentl*, 1984. The latter translation offers rhyming couplets, which at times actually reverse the meaning of the original lyrics. For instance, the German subtitles rendered the lines "Who'd have ever predicted / The moment would come / When I find myself grateful / They've kept women dumb" as "Now I have to realize / Women are dumb. / For which I am grateful. / Now I know why."[78] The method was used one last time in 2006, for *The Producers* (2005).

Looking back, one wonders why the German dubbing authors ever chose to subtitle songs in rhymes, not least since the captions constantly ignore the rhyme scheme of the original,[79] for instance omitting all internal rhymes. On the whole, this method rarely produces satisfactory results; it consistently veers away too much from the original.

## STRATEGY 3B: SUBTITLING IN PROSE

In the last fifty years, whenever an early Hollywood musical had its belated German or Austrian premiere, it was courtesy of the countries' public broadcasters. Channel ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen) repeatedly turned the genre into a focal point of its programming.[80] In 1973, the broadcaster started a loose series of thirty-nine musicals called "Des Broadways liebstes Kind"/"Broadway's Favorite Offspring." The films were telecast over the course of eight years and included three offerings that were made for US television.[81] Unfortunately, the musicals had strong competition, since they were aired at the same time as beloved thriller series *Tatort*. As a consequence, the ratings were mostly unsatisfactory considering that there were only three TV channels available in those days; they varied between 36 percent (for *My Fair Lady*, broadcast October 22, 1978) and 5 percent (for *Godspell*, 1970; April 24, 1977).

Yet the ZDF at least took care with how it presented the films; some—like *The King and I*—were painstakingly restored as far as it was possible. In the context of the then-prevalent cultural discourse on "authentic German versions," the program directors also decided to substitute the German dubbing of the songs with subtitles, in those cases where the German singing had been criticized (*West Side Story*)[82] or was deemed inappropriate (*Three Little Words* and *The Band Wagon*).

Yet even then one can perceive a learning curve—at the start, those subtitles were not really verbatim, but left out many of the details that made the songs both memorable and effective. In the early 1970s, subtitles in prose often turned statements of fact into statements of opinion[83] or claims into facts; they did not necessarily try to find equivalents for linguistic specifics (like dialects or neologisms). They also mismatched references and customarily replaced subjunctive forms with simple present tense.[84] Sometimes, the captions render the figurative English lyrics literal, in the process omitting the suggestiveness or poetry of the original.[85] In addition—as is common practice in subtitling—anything that might be (mis)construed as embellishments (such as repetitions, variations, detours, hesitations, circumlocutions, paraphrases, and interjections) was omitted.[86] This also included conjunctions and adjectives or adverbs.

When checking how subtitles have been inserted, it becomes evident that early on exact synchronicity of the German text and the lyrics that they are supposed to represent proved elusive—in practically every subtitled musical, there are moments when the captions appear too early or for too long. This is especially noticeable in the case of *Yolanda and the Thief* (1945), which was first presented to local audiences on television nearly thirty years after its US release, on June 7, 1974: during the song "Angel," the German subtitles appear regularly one line after their English equivalent, leaving the viewer in a state of confusion as the two obviously do not correspond.

On the whole, however, in the following twenty years, the subtitles for songs became longer and thus more detailed and "authentic," which implies that trust in the audience's ability to read faster increased. Whereas the first attempts at subtitling in prose can hardly be called verbatim, today German captions for lyrics are handled with much more sensitivity—"de-individualizations" and "de-characterizations"[87] as a consequence of deleting important information or linguistic idiosyncrasies are mostly a thing of the past.

That past, however, occasionally produced striking oddities, from which fascinating insights can be gleaned. Therefore, the following case studies involve minor Hollywood productions—*Two Girls and a Sailor* (1944) and *Dangerous When Wet* (1953)—neither of which is regarded as a classic of the genre. The ways in which these two early German-language versions were prepared for the local market are highly revealing concerning the release strategies, assumed audience preferences, critical judgments, and sociocultural discourses prevalent at the time of the films' original release in German and Austrian cinemas.

## CASE STUDY 3: *TWO GIRLS AND A SAILOR/MEIN SCHATZ IST EIN MATROSE—MY SWEETHEART IS A SAILOR* (1944)

Richard Thorpe's *Two Girls and a Sailor*, shot in 1944, was one of the very first musicals to play in German/Austrian cinemas after the end of World War II. The film tells the story of siblings, played by June Allyson and Gloria DeHaven, who run a canteen for members of the military, where they also perform as "The Deyo Sisters." It was released at a time—1949—when distributors did not yet know how to best present this kind of US entertainment to German-language audiences, and the approach chosen for this particular film is truly unique. Just before the end of the opening titles the audience hears the following announcement by dubbing actor Franz-Otto Krüger:

> Ladies and Gentlemen! Please excuse my sudden interference with the performance, but I have a compelling reason. You are about to see a beautiful revue film, which features some great American hit songs; and we want to somehow explain their content to you. That is why we have been searching for a solution. That solution is me. Every time somebody sings in English, I am going to get briefly involved and tell you what exactly is happening. Ladies and Gentlemen, once again apologies for the interruption, enjoy the movie and—goodbye.[88]

In the case of the song "Sweet and Lovely," the promised introduction consists of: "The song they are singing is called 'You are sweet and lovely like roses in May.' "[89] Those "roses in May," though, are not to be found in the English lyrics and therefore turn out to be an unnecessary addition. How to explain this amendment? It seems most likely a concession to local audiences who were familiar with that particular motif from German "Schlager" and folk songs. Cinemagoers therefore were encouraged to assume that the musical numbers might be sung in a foreign language, but that they otherwise did not differ from the songs in a German and Austrian revue film.

When in turn, Ella Fitzgerald's "A-Tisket-a-Tasket" is described as "a children's song, in which a little girl complains that she has lost her little yellow, not her red or blue—no, her *yellow* shopping basket, of all things";[90] it becomes evident that the information contained in these short annotations is minimal, since the content of the English songs is outlined so sketchily that cinemagoers would only get the vaguest of ideas of what they are about.

In one instance, the endeavor to present the US artists in a flattering light even leads to an alteration of the dialogue. The two sisters have an argument, which is followed immediately by a performance of American bandleader Harry James. In order to preserve the

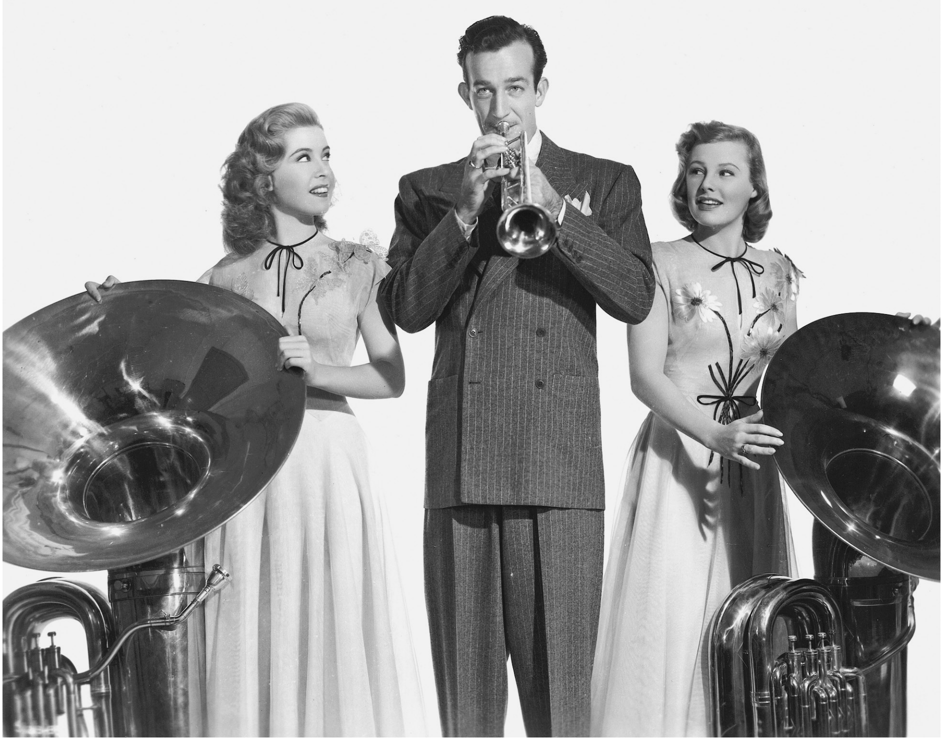

**FIGURE 9.2** June Allyson (right) and Gloria de Haven (left) as the 'Deyo Sisters' with bandleader Harry James in *Two Girls and a Sailor* (1944). Photo provided by the author.

chance to at least briefly introduce the musician in spite of the abrupt beginning of his number, the wording of the argument has been modified: June Allyson's final sentence already leads over to the next shot—in the German version she tells her sister: "Stop yakking! Listen rather to the music of Harry James."[91] This is the cue for the narrator to add: "Patsy is right. Please listen carefully, because Harry James is one of the most famous bandleaders and trumpeters of the United States."[92]

The general tone of these introductory remarks is modeled after German newsreels of the 1940s:

> Ladies and Gentlemen! We would like to introduce—Xavier Cugat and his South American orchestra. This joint is jumping—toward South America. Lina Romay is banging, but not because she wants to bang her own drum, but because this is the beginning of her song, in which she invites a man, unknown to us, to say "yes." And what man would say "no" to this?[93]

Yet the number thus introduced is in Spanish, which is only one of several violations of the approach announced earlier ("Every time somebody sings in English"). For instance, the three songs performed by Jimmy Durante[94] have been dubbed into German, whereas the numbers "A Love Like Ours" and "My Mother Told Me" have no introduction whatsoever. By thus opting for a "pick and mix" approach, which is as confused as it is confusing, it is highly unlikely that this German dubbing could persuade local film fans of the virtues of the Hollywood musical.

## CASE STUDY 4: *DANGEROUS WHEN WET/DIE WASSERPRINZESSIN—THE WATER PRINCESS* (1953)

Esther Williams had already appeared in fourteen MGM films when Charles Walters directed her in *Dangerous When Wet* (1953), which turned out to be one of her better vehicles. As per usual, the script was constructed in such a way that the actress had plenty of opportunities to demonstrate her swimming skills. This time, Williams plays a country girl who for publicity purposes and with the support of her family prepares to swim the English Channel.

This musical, though, arrived in German and Austrian cinemas on April 6, 1954, in an adaptation that completely alters the musical interludes: every song has been overlaid with a monologue that corresponds neither to the respective number nor to the rest of the movie. These remarks are voiced by the father of the female protagonist who is a mere supporting character in the original and consequently is promoted to a figure of authority in the dubbed version as he now is aurally present in scenes in which he does not even appear.

If the cinemagoers actually *do* get a chance to listen to a musical number without additional German-language accompaniment, it is because the respective song found favor with the author of the dubbing script: "Right now I could say a lot more about the sad fate of anguished fathers who own pretty daughters, but this time I prefer to stay silent, so that you can listen to this song, which is really quite lovely."[95]

Those additional comments allow intriguing conclusions about the attitude of German-speaking countries in the 1950s toward the Hollywood musical. The father's observations during the number "My Wildest Dreams" in which the male protagonist—played by Fernando Lamas—confesses his love to the heroine provide a telling example:

> See, I, the cow farmer from the sticks, had smelled immediately that this guy is nothing but a Casanova, and I was not mistaken. To sweet-talk my daughter, he even sang in English. If it was up to me, he might as well have sung in Chinese as a means of camouflage. It's not necessary to understand a single word in order to grasp what he is up to.[96]

First of all, this monologue proves that for local cinemagoers, songs in English were a problem mainly because they lacked the requisite language skills to understand them—it's more or less total "Chinese" to them. But the father also offers a reading of the scene

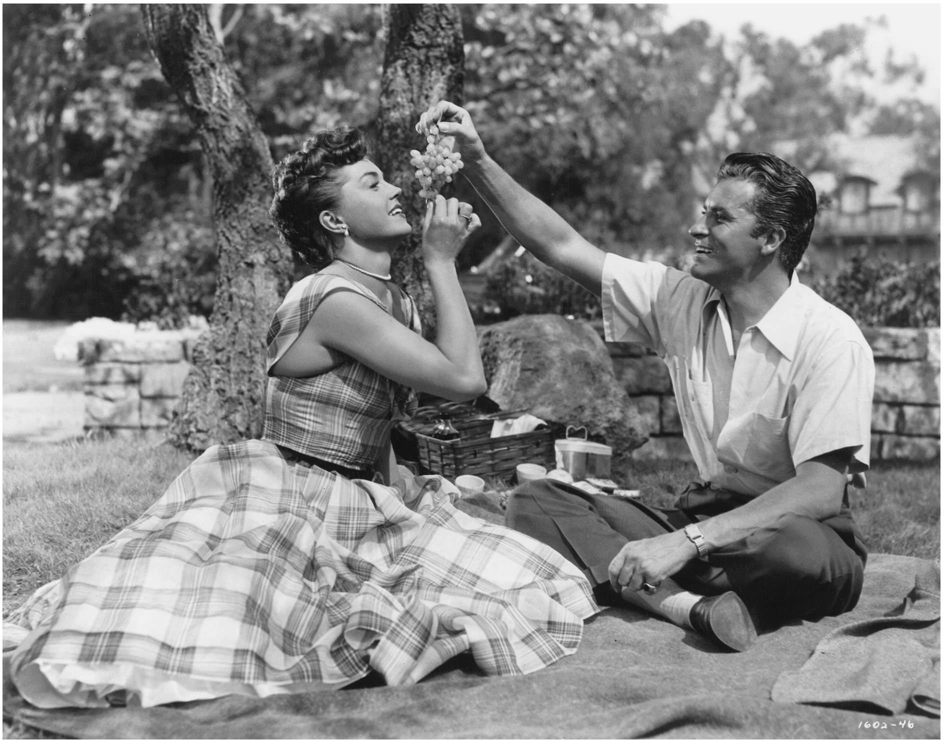

**FIGURE 9.3** The 'Casanova' and his innocent prey? Fernando Lamas and Esther Williams in *Dangerous When Wet* (1953). Photo provided by the author.

that is utterly alien to the original, where Lamas's character is presented as a womanizer, but overall is clearly meant to be sympathetic. In the German version, however, the phrase "nothing but a Casanova" clearly devalues the male protagonist, which doesn't make much sense because in the last scene of the film, as is to be expected, hero and heroine are united in a happy ending.

Just as illuminating is how the song—which otherwise is neither subtitled nor dubbed—is explained to the local audience: the commentator emphasizes that the cinemagoers do not miss anything important ("It's not necessary to understand a single word in order to grasp what he is up to"), although the father doesn't seem fully convinced and thus proceeds to interpret the situation for the viewer anyway. Moreover, his remark highlights the distrust that German dubbing authors (and audiences) had regarding non-diegetic songs, because in their eyes the hero uses the number for dishonest motives: he "camouflages" because he wants to "sweet-talk" the heroine.

This establishes a negative connotation of the musical numbers that is reinforced later on. Because Williams was meant to be seen in the water as often as possible, *Dangerous When Wet* includes a song during which the two leads get ready for one of these swimming displays in changing rooms while singing "Ain't Nature Grand." The father comments on the scene as follows: "This guy had an *idée fixe*. Every time he took off his clothes, he had to sing. It was like a contagious disease. When my daughter heard him, *she* started to take off her clothes."[97]

Here singing is equated with a neurosis ("*idée fixe*") that on top of this has improper side effects ("she started to take off her clothes"). Clearly, German-speaking audiences had no rational explanation for the wholly unrealistic song-and-dance numbers of film musicals from abroad, and consequently could only justify the songs in *Dangerous When Wet* by attesting that the protagonist must suffer from psychological defects.

## Conclusion: Where Have All the Dubbings Gone?

Over the course of sixty-five years, the methods of how to prepare the songs of a Hollywood musical for German-language audiences have changed together with the understanding of what constitutes an "authentic translation." In the first few years after 1945, a "truthful" rendering of the original predominantly aimed exclusively for retaining formal elements, especially rhymes, even if it meant altering the content of a song. Since the 1980s, a reverse trend has gained momentum and today an accurate reproduction of the content in all its details takes precedence over stylistic means such as rhyme, prosody, assonance, and alliterations (among others). Films are also no longer shortened for their Continental European release.

But what has happened to all those German versions that once were cut and badly or misleadingly dubbed or subtitled? When film and musical theater scholars want to learn about and to study these and other early German release prints, they face many problems. While there are records of which films were released when, the films themselves are often no longer readily available.

Because it is cheaper to produce DVDs and Blu-rays that include several different language and subtitle options at once, a large number of those musicals that once were cut, sometimes relentlessly so, have been restored for financial reasons, not out of artistic considerations. Gone, for instance, are the severe cuts made to *Calamity Jane* (1953), which was shortened by six numbers including the Oscar-winning "Secret Love," and to *Gypsy* (1962), which had been reduced to a mere torso when its first 57 minutes were removed.[98] A viewer not familiar with a movie's release history would never guess how many musicals shown in Germany and Austria in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s were subjected to radical interference.

Also irretrievably lost is the original German dubbing of the songs in *West Side Story* (1961) since TV channel ZDF commissioned new subtitles for film's television premiere in 1973; unfortunately, later home entertainment versions of the movie include neither the German singing nor the 1973 subtitles. All of this means that the greater part of the original German-language soundtracks has vanished without a trace; it is impossible to gauge their quality and impact or to explore what they may reveal about the sociocultural climate in which they were produced.

One final example may suffice to illustrate the sorrowful state of film studies when it comes to archiving or otherwise preserving original German-language versions: the German/Austrian release print of *Flower Drum Song* has not been seen since the movie's initial release in Germany and Austria on April 26, 1962, when the film was excoriated by reviewers for its excruciating dubbing of the songs. The film has never been broadcast on German-language television, nor has it been released on VHS/DVD/Blu-ray.

But its cliché-laden German title—*Almond Eyes and Lotus Blossoms*—already hints at the sort of insight one might gain into the depiction of Asians as "the Other" prevalent in the early 1960s if one could study a copy of the German version. But there seem to be no ways of finding one, as the film's distributor, Universal, refuses to disclose whether they still have any prints or other material related to the film and its dubbing.[99] The company responsible for the German dubbing—Berliner Synchron Wenzel Lüdecke—was more forthcoming and searched their own archive for the dubbing book, only to discover that it was part of a whole stack of manuscripts to be ruined in a water leak twenty years ago. All that still exists is a file of the dubbing credentials, which lists who provided the translation, who the dubbing actors were, and who supervised the dubbing.

In this case and elsewhere, it thus is no longer traceable what radical steps the US majors took in their efforts to wind up with an "attractive" product for the German-language market. That they were willing to go very far indeed is already confirmed by the case studies above.

## NOTES

1. Thomas Thomson, "Tuning US Musicals to Overseas Box Office," *Life*, March 12, 1965, 55–58; here: 55.
2. Johannes Hauser, *Neuaufbau der westdeutschen Filmwirtschaft 1946–1955 und der Einfluß der US-amerikanischen Filmpolitik. Vom reichseigenen Filmmonopolkonzern (UFI) zur privatwirtschaftlichen Konkurrenzwirtschaft* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus, 1989), 119.
3. Martin Loiperdinger, "Amerikanisierung im Kino? Hollywood und das westdeutsche Publikum der 50er Jahre," *Theaterzeitschrift* 28 (Summer 1989): 50–60; here: 50.
4. German-speaking northern Switzerland does not possess a well-developed dubbing/subtitling industry of its own, as the films released on Swiss territory have traditionally been dubbed for the French-, Italian- and German-speaking markets by French, Italian, and German or Austrian dubbing/subtitling companies. Thus, the region is hardly ever regarded as a primary market by US distributors, which is why it will not be a focal point of the following discussion.
5. John Kobal, *Gotta Sing, Gotta Dance. A Pictorial History of Film Musicals* (London: Hamlyn, 1972), 114. As Robert L. McLaughlin and Sally E. Parry point out, it was only in the late 1930s that the UK became a more important foreign market for the US majors than Germany. See Robert L. McLaughlin and Sally E. Parry, *We'll Always Have the Movies: American Cinema during World War II* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 30–31.
6. Hauser, *Neuaufbau*, 561.
7. Wolfgang Tichy, ed., *Rororo Film-Lexikon* (Reinbek: Rororo, 1981), IV:939.
8. Tichy, *Rororo Film-Lexikon*, V:1045.
9. In the late 1930s, the Berlin UFA (short for Universum Film AG, founded in 1917) had been nationalized by the Nazis; from 1942 to 1945 the company had a state film monopoly in Germany.
10. This conclusion can be drawn from the fact that all the US studios abandoned the release patterns outlined above after no more than a few months, which they would not have done if any of the films had been successful.
11. This happened to Doris Day, who had become an audience favorite with the comedies she made costarring Rock Hudson, such as *Pillow Talk*, 1959. Olaf Jubin, "From *That's Entertainment!* to *That's Entertainment?* Globalisation and the Consumption of the Hollywood Musical in Germany and Austria," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 3, no. 3 (2009): 235–251; here: 246.
12. Loiperdinger, "Amerikanisierung im Kino?" 54.
13. "Weltweit wird der Spielplan-Anteil von Hollywood-Filmen auf den Exportmärkten seinerzeit auf 65% geschätzt. In Westdeutschland erreicht Hollywood gerade die Hälfte davon, nämlich 30%. Auf dem nach Großbritannien wichtigsten Exportmarkt in der BRD schneidet Hollywood also denkbar schlecht ab" (Loiperdinger, "Amerikanisierung im Kino?" 56). All translations by the author.
14. Joseph Garncarz, "'Nicht zeitgemäß und nicht zur Vorführung in Deutschland geeignet . . .': Die deutschen Fassungen des Kultfilms *Casablanca*," *Film-Dienst* (April 1992): 36–39; here: 37.
15. Garncarz, "Nicht zeitgemäß," 37.
16. Garncarz, "Nicht zeitgemäß," 37.
17. Typical examples include *A Star Is Born* (George Cukor, 1954), *It's Always Fair Weather* (Stanley Donen/Gene Kelly, 1955), and *Love Me or Leave Me* (Charles Vidor, 1955).

18. Günther Bartosch, *Die ganze Welt des Musicals* (Wiesbaden: F. Englisch, 1981), 64.
19. Klaus Sigl, Werner Schneider, and Ingo Tornow, *Jede Menge Kohle? Kunst und Kommerz auf dem deutschen Filmmarkt der Nachkriegszeit. Filmpreise und Kassenerfolge* (Munich: Filmland Presse, 1986), 133.
20. Both Garland and Powell were signed by Hollywood while still in their teens (at the age of thirteen and fourteen, respectively.) They and other ingénues, such as Kathryn Grayson and Debbie Reynolds, were then subjected to a careful strategy of building up their stardom. For more information on how the dream factory manufactured movie idols, see Jeanine Basinger, *The Star Machine* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), and Paul MacDonald, *The Star System: Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2001).
21. Garncarz, "Nicht zeitgemäß," 37.
22. Joseph Garncarz, *Filmfassungen. Eine Theorie signifikanter Filmvariation* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992), 121–124.
23. Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung*, 94.
24. Bartosch, *Die ganze Welt der Musicals*, 76.
25. For more details on which songs exactly were removed see Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung*, 464–469. The cut numbers usually fall into one of two categories: ballads and songs for minor characters. Jubin, "From *That's Entertainment!*," 239.
26. All three films today are available in their original length on DVD.
27. Garncarz, *Filmfassungen*, 15.
28. Gabriele Toepser-Ziegert, *Theorie und Praxis der Synchronisation—dargestellt am Beispiel einer Fernsehserie* (Münster: Regensberg, 1978), 25.
29. Jiří Levý, *Die literarische Übersetzung. Theorie einer Kunstgattung* (Frankfurt am Main and Bonn: Athenäum, 1969), 38.
30. Levý, *Die literarische Übersetzung*, 25.
31. As this was particularly difficult to adhere to when dubbing songs, musical numbers often were the most obvious exception to this industry standard.
32. Toepser-Ziegert, *Theorie und Praxis der Synchronisation*, 226.
33. "Einschließlich Synchronisations- und mit Kopierkosten erfordert der Auslandsfilm vom Verleiher einen Kapitaleinsatz von höchstens 200.000 DM. Dieser Betrag wird jedoch immer eingespielt." Wilfried Adam, *Das Risiko für Filmwirtschaft* (Wiesbaden: Verlag der Filmwirtschaft, 1959), 84.
34. Rolf Steinkopp, *Synchronisation in Hamburg* (Baden-Baden and Hamburg: Nomos, 1987), 18.
35. In the late 1960s and 1970s, this method was also regularly applied to films starring Barbra Streisand.
36. Otto Hesse-Quack, *Der Übertragungprozeß bei der Synchronisation von Filmen. Eine interkulturelle Untersuchung* (München: Ernst Reinhardt, 1969), 214.
37. Because Dahlberg sounds uncannily like Julie Andrews, this in turn led to the ironic situation that at least in the German dubbing, "Julie Andrews" *does* sing the score of *My Fair Lady*.
38. The only other time something similar happened was in 1999, when Phil Collins recorded the songs he wrote for Disney's animated *Tarzan* in English, French, Spanish, Italian, and German. The last of these versions was not entirely successful—listening to the dubbing, it becomes abundantly clear that songwriter is completely unaware of the subtleties of the German lyrics.

39. Despite an intensive search, no copyright holder for this photograph could be located; none of the major German and international photo agencies has it and the dubbing studio itself, which used to display it on their website, has changed ownership several times in the last few years and has not responded to various requests. However, it was used a few years ago as an illustration to an article published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*: see Steffen Uhlmann, "Film ab. In den Studios von Berliner Synchron wurden Klassiker wie *Der Pate* bearbeitet. Dann kam die Krise. Nun läuft der Betrieb wieder," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 10, 2015, https://www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/berliner-synchron-film-ab-1.2560669.
40. Thomas L. Rowe, "The English Dubbing Text," *Babel: Revue Internationale de la Traduction/International Journal of Translation* 3 (1960): 116–120; here: 119.
41. This German neologism is difficult to render in English; it roughly translates as "Highlowvalleysprings."
42. "Hier wurde nicht versucht, mit der Übersetzung Brücken zu bauen, über die eine Annäherung zwischen sprachlich und kulturell verschiedenen Ländern und Kulturen möglich wäre—hier wurde die Übersetzung zum Instrument der Kolonialisierung des Auslands auf deutscher Leinwand." Jörg-Dieter Müller, *Die Übertragung fremdsprachliche Filmmaterials ins Deutsche. Eine Untersuchung zu sprachlichen und außersprachlichen Einflußfaktoren, Rahmenbedingungen, Möglichkeiten und Grenzen* (unpub. PhD diss., University of Regensburg, 1982), 26.
43. The singing voices of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were provided, respectively, by Rudi Schuricke, a highly popular chart-topping crooner, and the classically trained Ilse Hülper.
44. For more details on the disastrous reception of *The Sound of Music* in the territory where it is set, see Olaf Jubin, "The Hills Are Alive with . . . *My Songs, My Dreams*? *The Sound of Music* in Germany and Austria," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 7, no. 2 (2013): 135–156.
45. The musical was translated by Rolf Merz and Gerhard Merz-Hagen; however, a detailed comparison between the English and the German lyrics reveals that the latter lacks the ingeniousness of Sheldon Harnick's original (Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Gattung*, 193–205).
46. The last movie to have its songs dubbed into German was *Cats* (2019); the German voice cast includes several luminaries of the German-language musical theater scene, such as Patrick Stanke (singing for Robbie Fairchild), Patricia Meeden (Jennifer Hudson), Sabrina Weckerlin (Mette Towley), and Carin Filipčič (Naoimh Morgan). Several of the other dubbing voices—such as Pia Allgaier (Taylor Swift) and Julia Scheeser (Francesca Hayward)—had already been used in the German versions of *Frozen* (2013), *Frozen II* (2019), and *Aladdin* (2019), respectively.
47. For more details see Edi Grieg, "Die Disney Synchronisationen im Vergleich. Teil 3: deutsche Geschichte und Stachelbeeren, *Schneewittchen und die Sieben Zwerge*, www.trickfilmstimmen.de/synchros/vergleich3.htm, accessed September 15, 2019.
48. Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung*, 210–211.
49. For a detailed comparison between the German and English lyrics of the two ballads "Once upon a Dream" and "I Wonder," see Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung*, 212–214.
50. Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung*, 214.
51. This is also confirmed by the fact that in two other non-Disney releases of the same time, *Tom Thumb* (1958) and *Cinderfella* (1961), the love songs are the only ones that were neither dubbed nor subtitled but remained in the original.
52. Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung*, 215–223.
53. Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung*, 223–227.

54. Anon., "Das Dschungelbuch," www.kinoweb.de/film2000/JungleBook/film01.php3, accessed January 2, 2020.
55. Riethmüller occasionally collaborated with dubbing author Eberhard Cronshagen, who provided the German translation for *Mary Poppins* and for the second German dubbing of *Snow White* (in 1965 and 1966, respectively), as well as for *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* in 1972.
56. For more information on the various dubbings, see Edi Grieg, "Das Disney Synchron Archiv," www.trickfilmstimmen.de/main.htm, accessed January 10, 2020.
57. A petition to make those earlier dubbings available was drawn up in 2014, but never gained much traction—it was signed by only 505 people. In November 2015, Walt Disney Home Entertainment Deutschland responded, arguing that nobody nowadays would be interested in or even aware of the original dubbings. Therefore, the company had decided to reject the request. Anon., "Disney Klassiker mit deutschen Originalsynchronisationen," https://www.openpetition.de/petition/online/disney-klassiker-mit-deutschen-originalsynchronisationen, accessed January 15, 2020.
58. For more details, see Jubin, "From *That's Entertainment!*," 249.
59. I have found traces of the original dubbing of one of them—1955's *Lady and the Tramp*—via a 45 rpm single I had as a child, released in the late 1960s, that on the A-side featured the story of the film and on the B-side included two of its songs, culled from its German release print, in this case "We Are Siamese" and "Bella Notte."
60. The US release clocked in at 118 minutes, whereas the print for German and Austrian cinemas was 100 minutes long. The dubbed version lost another 11 minutes when it was first released on VHS and DVD in 2002.
61. "The Old Homeguard" and "Eglantine" were deleted, while "Portobello Road" and "Substitutiary Locomotion" were significantly shortened.
62. For its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1996, *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* was reconstructed by the studio to include sequences cut from the original release print; since then, its official length is 139 minutes. This in turn means that the German version now is actually a hefty 50 minutes shorter than the American one.
63. German and Austrian "Schlager" are popular songs with catchy music and often simple, sentimental lyrics.
64. Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung*, 234–236.
65. An additional modification of a song's meaning results from a change of tenses: German lyrics often resort to *present tense* where the English uses *future tense*, since a verbatim translation of the latter is grammatically more complex in German.
66. Films like *The Lion King*, *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *Hercules* (1997), and *Tarzan* (1999) premiered in the United States in June or July and were regularly released in November of the same year in German-language countries.
67. Because new films are usually released on Thursdays in Germany and on Fridays in the United States, *Frozen II* could actually be seen by German-speaking audiences one day *before* the sequel was shown in North America.
68. Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Gattung*, 245–261.
69. For more details, see Jubin, "From *That's Entertainment!*," 236–237.
70. As repeated attempts at getting reprint permission for these two sets of lyrics have failed, please use the following Internet websites as a source: English version—"Let It Go. Lyrics," https://genius.com/Idina-menzel-let-it-go-lyrics; German version—"Lass jetzt los,"

https://www.mifus.de/out/pictures/mifus_media/category/eiskoenigin/lass-jetzt-los-eiskoenigin.pdf. Both accessed December 18, 2020.

71. The German title translates literally as *Broadway Magic*.
72. Toepser-Ziegert, *Theorie und Praxis der Synchronisation*, ii.
73. Michael Volber, "Manufaktur oder Fließband. Glück und Leid der boomenden Synchronwirtschaft," *Film-Echo/Filmwoche* 56 (October 4, 1989): 3–7; here: 5.
74. Tellingly, the 2003 German DVD release of the movie exchanged the rhymed subtitles for verbatim ones but retained the misleading dubbing.
75. Unfortunately, efforts to first identify the copyright holder for "Who's Complaining" and then to get reprint permission for the English lyrics of the song have proved unsuccessful. After months of email correspondence with various potential rights holders, it seems that the copyright resides with Hal Leonard. However, several reprint permission requests to the company went unanswered, perhaps because of the pandemic. Therefore, the reader it referred to check out the original English lyrics in any home entertainment version of *Cover Girl*, for instance the 2017 Blu-ray issued by "Eureka. The Masters of Cinema Series" (EKA 70239) where the number can be found at 15:42–19:13 min. The song is also available stretched out over two clips on YouTube: it starts at 2.48 min. at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hffHNeBysIY and continues over at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XO9g_lTGwCs. (Both clips last accessed 18 December 2020.)
76. This 1973 box-office flop was also cut; in the German version two songs ("If I Could Go Back" and "Where Knowledge Ends") are missing.
77. Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung*, 314–318.
78. "Nun muß ich erkennen: / Die Frauen sind dumm! / Ich bin dafür dankbar. / Jetzt weiß ich warum." For further details and examples, see Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung*, 291–314.
79. The German version of *Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* constitutes an exception to this rule of thumb (Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung*, 287).
80. As Günther Bartosch attests retrospectively, no other organizations had done as much as the ZDF "to make the musical popular in Germany" (Bartosch, *Die ganze Welt der Musicals*, 183). In 1983, the TV channel started another series of thirteen films, focused on the career of Fred Astaire, yet once again the ratings (4–15%) suggest that audience interest was limited.
81. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1973), *Pinocchio* (1976), and *Peter Pan* (1976).
82. The *Rororo Filmlexikon*, a German reference book on movie history, attests that the screen adaptation of the 1957 stage classic has a mere two flaws: "The only irritants were Richard Beymer's performance and the unavoidable, but hardly convincing German dubbing of the songs." ("Lediglich die Darstellung Richard Beymes sowie die unvermeidliche, aber wenig überzeugend durchgeführte Synchronisation der Gesangsnummern störten"; Tichy, *Rororo Film-Lexikon*, III:763.)
83. Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung*, 337. For a detailed analysis of the 1973 subtitles for *West Side Story*—the first movie to have more or less verbatim captions—see Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung*, 319–343.
84. Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung*, 348–349.
85. Jubin, *Die unterschätzte Filmgattung*, 364–365.
86. Pierre-François Caillé, "Cinéma et Traduction. Le Traducteur devant l'Écran," in *Babel: Revue Internationale de la Traduction/International Journal of Translation* 3 (1960): 103–109; here: 109.

87. These terms ("Entindividualisierung" and "Entcharakterisierung," respectively) were introduced by Jörg-Dietmar Müller, *Übertragung*, 93.
88. "Meine sehr verehrten Damen und Herren! Verzeihen Sie, wenn ich mich plötzlich in die Vorstellung einschalte, aber ich habe einen zwingenden Grund. Sie werden einen wunderschönen Revuefilm sehen, der einige große amerikanische Schlager enthält, deren Inhalt wir Ihnen irgendwie erklären wollen. Darum haben wir nach einem Ausweg gesucht. Der Ausweg bin ich. Immer wenn Englisch gesungen wird, blende ich mich kurz ein und sage Ihnen, um was es sich handelt. Meine Damen und Herren, verzeihen Sie nochmals die Störung, recht gute Unterhaltung und—auf Wiedersehen."
89. "Das Lied, das sie singen, heißt 'Du bist süß und lieblich wie Rosen im Mai.' "
90. ". . . ein Kinderlied, in dem sich ein kleines Mädchen darüber beklagt, das es sein kleines gelbes, nicht das rote oder blaue—nein, ausgerechnet das gelbe Einholkörbchen verloren hat."
91. " 'Quatsch' nicht! Hör' lieber auf die Musik von Harry James."
92. "Patsy hat recht. Bitte hören Sie genau zu, denn Harry James ist einer der berühmtesten Kapellmeister und Trompeter Amerikas."
93. "Meine sehr verehrten Damen und Herren! Wir stellen vor—Yavier Cugat und sein südamerikanisches Orchester. Die Post geht ab—nach Südamerika. Lina Romay klappert, nicht weil es zum Handwerk gehört, sondern sie klappert den Auftakt zu ihrem Lied, in dem sie einen uns unbekannten Herren auffordert, ja zu sagen. Welcher Mann würde da wohl nein sagen?"
94. "Who Will Be with You When I'm Far Away," "Inka Dinka Doo," and "Did You Ever Have the Feeling."
95. "Ich könnte an dieser Stelle noch viel mehr erzählen, über das traurige Los von geplagten Vätern, die hübsche Töchter besitzen, aber ich ziehe es vor, diesmal zu schweigen, damit sie dieses Lied hören können, das wirklich entzückend ist."
96. "Sehen Sie, ich, der Kuhbauer vom Lande, hatte sofort gewittert, daß dieser Bursche nichts als ein Casanova ist, und ich täuschte mich nicht. Um meine Tochter zu bezirzen, sang er sogar Englisch. Von mir aus hätte er zu Tarnungszwecken ebenso gut Chinesisch singen können. Man braucht ja kein Wort zu verstehen, um zu begreifen, was er will."
97. "Dieser Bursche hatte eine fixe Idee. Immer wenn er sich auszog, mußte er singen. Es war wie eine ansteckende Krankheit. Wenn meine Tochter ihn singen hörte, zog *sie* sich aus."
98. For more information, see Jubin, "From *That's Entertainment!*," 239–240.
99. Repeated email requests by the author to the distributor have gone unanswered.

# PART III

# PRODUCTION HISTORIES

## CHAPTER 10

# "HEAR THE BEAT OF DANCING FEET"

## 42nd Street *(1933) and the "New" Film Musical*

TIM CARTER

The first talking films quite naturally turned to musicals as studios on both sides of the Atlantic vied to show off their new sound technologies: over sixty were released in 1929, and a similar number in 1930. The precipitous decline in 1931 (twenty or so) and 1932 (around ten) might be attributed to the Great Depression, at least so far as Hollywood was concerned. But while economics and the wearing off of novelty played a part, it also reflected a crisis of form in terms of whether and how to transfer (or mimic) Broadway-style musical comedies and operettas on the one hand, or "Follies"-type revues on the other. However, a third option—the straight-to-film musical designed specifically for the medium—was starting to appear on the table.

*42nd Street* is a case in point.[1] The West Coast studio that had pioneered the talkies with its Vitaphone system, Warner Bros., was now facing intense competition from MGM, Paramount, and RKO Pictures, and broader experiments with color film had proven cost-ineffective and aesthetically deficient. In mid-1932, however, Darryl F. Zanuck, then head of production at Warner Bros., reportedly engaged in a degree of subterfuge to persuade Jack Warner to return to musicals. His move combined a back-to-basics approach with gaining a jumpstart on the studio's rivals, making an arrangement with Samuel Goldwyn to secure the services of Busby Berkeley, talent-spotting Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler (plus rescuing a young Ginger Rogers from a bad contract with Paramount), and teaming up with song composer Harry Warren and lyricist Al Dubin.[2] Whitney Bolton's (uncredited) treatment of Bradford Ropes's 1932 novel, expanded by screenwriters Rian James (Julian Herbert Rothschild) and James Seymour, also exploited the potential of creating a film musical that was about, rather than based on, a Broadway show. This rather neatly affirmed the integrity of the medium while also adhering to the typical "backstage musical" format that clung to canons of verisimilitude in terms of justifying the song-and-dance routines as diegetic (in the music-theatrical sense of "real" performances). It established—or perhaps better, re-established—a formula that Warner Bros. then followed to different degrees in a remarkable series of film musicals released in quick succession between March 1933 and March 1935. For the majority of them, Busby Berkeley directed the musical numbers (see Table 10.1), and they gained him increasing recognition for his creative talents.[3] *42nd Street* is the grittiest: it also helped rescue Warner Bros. from near bankruptcy.

Zanuck later said that he had two different scripts for *42nd Street* in mind—one with musical numbers and one without—although this might seem implausible save perhaps at the very earliest stages of planning the film.[4] He had built his reputation at Warner Bros. on dark gangster movies such as *The Public Enemy* and *Little Caesar* of 1931, and the fact that two of the stars of the former, James Cagney and Joan Blondell, would appear in subsequent Warner Bros. musicals gives those later films a sharper edge. Blondell was to have played Ann ("Anytime Annie") Lowell—the Ginger Rogers role—in *42nd Street* but she had other assignments.[5] Zanuck also wanted Mervyn LeRoy to direct (as he had done for *Little Caesar*), but LeRoy fell ill and was replaced by Lloyd Bacon, who fit the mold by exposing the rigors of the music-theatrical profession in the style of a stark, uncompromising documentary. The sparse scenery and sparingly lit black-and-white photography of *42nd Street* also matched the Depression-era theme as "Julian Marsh" struggles to rescue his fortunes—and those of his cast—in bringing the show *Pretty Lady* to the stage. Furthermore, it kept studio costs down.

The relentless process of staging a "Broadway" musical is shown in striking, and astonishingly accurate, detail. But the film also is leavened with in-jokes and plenty of pre-Code sexual innuendo. Not for nothing is *42nd Street* included in the American Film Institute's 2006 list of "greatest movie musicals." It was perfectly designed for, and wholly reflects, its times, if not quite—we shall see—in ways one might expect.

## FROM NOVEL TO SCRIPT

In December 1932, Zanuck announced in an article in the *Hollywood Reporter* that

> We have just completed a musical exposé, *Forty-second Street*, which dramatically endeavors to lift the curtain and reveal the strenuous, heartbreaking efforts of a well known Broadway producer to stage a musical comedy in this year of depression.[6]

Its creation was achieved with remarkable speed. Warner Bros. spent $6,000 to purchase the screen rights to Bradford Ropes's 1932 novel, *42nd Street*, before publication (it was registered for copyright on September 15), and the studio may not have realized quite what it was getting.[7] Ropes (1905–1966) had worked as a dancer in vaudeville, granting him a stamp of authenticity that he exploited to the full in his text, dropping names and theatrical terms right, left, and center. His two subsequent theatrical novels,

**Table 10.1 Busby Berkeley’s Musicals for Warner Bros., March 1933 to March 1935**

| | |
|---|---|
| *42nd Street* (March 11, 1933)[a] | *Starring*: Warner Baxter, Bebe Daniels, Ruby Keeler, George Brent, Dick Powell, Ginger Rogers. *Director*: Lloyd Bacon. *Screenplay*: Rian James, James Seymour, Whitney Bolton. *Music*: Harry Warren (lyrics: Al Dubin). *Art direction*: Jack Okey. *Cinematography*: Sol Polito. *Production*: Warner Bros. (Darryl F. Zanuck). |
| *Gold Diggers of 1933* (May 27, 1933)[b] | *Starring*: Warren William, Joan Blondell, Aline MacMahon, Ruby Keeler, Dick Powell. *Director*: Mervyn LeRoy. *Screenplay*: Erwin S. Gelsey, James Seymour. *Music*: Harry Warren (lyrics: Al Dubin). *Art direction*: Anton Grot. *Cinematography*: Sol Polito. *Production*: Warner Bros. (Robert Lord, Jack L. Warner). |
| *Footlight Parade* (Sept. 30, 1933) | *Starring*: James Cagney, Joan Blondell, Ruby Keeler, Dick Powell. *Director*: Lloyd Bacon. *Screenplay*: Manuel Seff, James Seymour (story by Robert Lord, Peter Milne). *Music*: Harry Warren (lyrics: Al Dubin), Sammy Fain (lyrics: Irving Kahal). *Art direction*: Jack Okey. *Cinematography*: George Barnes. *Production*: Warner Bros. (Robert Lord). |
| *Fashions of 1934* (Feb. 14, 1934)[c] | *Starring*: William Powell, Bette Davis, Frank McHugh, Hugh Herbert. *Director*: William Dieterle. *Screenplay*: F. Hugh Herbert, Carl Erickson. *Music*: Sammy Fain (lyrics: Irving Kahal). *Art direction*: Jack Okey. *Cinematography*: William Rees. *Production*: Warner Bros. (Henry Blanke). |
| *Wonder Bar* (March 31, 1934)[d] | *Starring*: Al Jolson, Kay Francis, Dolores del Río, Ricardo Cortez, Dick Powell, Guy Kibbee. *Director*: Lloyd Bacon. *Screenplay*: Earl Baldwin. *Music*: Harry Warren (lyrics: Al Dubin). *Art direction*: Jack Okey. *Cinematography*: Sol Polito. *Production*: First National (= Warner Bros.). |
| *Dames* (Aug. 16, 1934) | *Starring*: Ruby Keeler, Dick Powell, Joan Blondell, Guy Kibbee, ZaSu Pitts, Hugh Herbert. *Director*: Ray Enright. *Screenplay*: Robert Lord, Delmer Daves. *Music*: Harry Warren (lyrics: Al Dubin), Sammy Fain (lyrics: Irving Kahal), Allie Wrubel (lyrics: Mort Dixon). *Art direction*: Robert M. Haas, Willy Pogany. *Cinematography*: George Barnes, Sidney Hickox, Sol Polito. *Production*: Warner Bros. (Hal B. Wallis). |
| *Gold Diggers of 1935* (March 16, 1935) | *Starring*: Dick Powell, Adolphe Menjou, Gloria Stuart, Alice Brady. *Director*: Busby Berkeley. *Screenplay*: Manual Seff, Peter Milne (story by Robert Lord, Peter Milne). *Music*: Harry Warren (lyrics: Al Dubin). *Art direction*: Anton Grot. *Cinematography*: George Barnes. *Production*: First National (= Warner Bros.; Robert Lord). |

[a] Based on the novel (1932) by Bradford Ropes.

[b] Based on the stage play *The Gold Diggers* by Avery Hopwood (1919), the subsequent silent film (Warner Bros., 1923), and the musical film *Gold Diggers of Broadway* (Warner Bros., 1929).

[c] Based on a story, “The Fashion Plate,” by Harry Collins and Warren Duff.

[d] Based on the stage show *The Wonder Bar* (1931; music, Robert Katscher; lyrics, Irving Caesar; book, Irving Caesar, Aben Kandel), adapting the 1930 German operetta by Géza Herczeg and Karl Farkas.

*Stage Mother* and *Go into Your Dance*, also received film treatments (in 1933 and 1935); he then provided a number of screenplays for Hollywood potboilers.

Ropes's *42nd Street* is an exposé of Broadway life as vaudeville becomes passé, the Theatre Guild takes over the "serious" stage, and Hollywood is more than just a distant threat. It is a long novel populated with characters both savory and unsavory from the theatrical world and its various underbellies each struggling to keep their heads above water, and to squash whoever might stand in their way, as they take the show *Pretty Lady* through rehearsal to opening night on Broadway. At the head of the operation stand the Jewish Abe Green and Si Friedman, who hire "the king of musical comedy producers" (4), Julian Marsh, to take charge of the proceedings. Marsh ends up bearing more than a passing resemblance to Florenz Ziegfeld Jr. (who died on July 22, 1932)—Zanuck's "well known Broadway producer"—in terms not just of his tyrannical behavior in the theater but also of his being in precarious financial difficulties following the Wall Street Crash. Their main difference, however, is that Marsh (who is British in the novel) is in a long-term relationship with Billy Lawler (Ziegfeld was married to Billie Burke). In Ropes's narrative, Lawler is a juvenile lead who uses his influence to remove any rivals for Marsh's affections, including blond chorus boys. Dorothy Brock is both temperamental and vulgar, and Peggy Sawyer becomes so as stardom looms, although she is kinder to Lawler than some of his gay-bashing colleagues and eventually agrees to what he proposes as a near marriage of convenience, which she knows is just a smoke screen for his continuing with Marsh. Pat Denning is a weak-willed gigolo milking both Brock and Amy Lee, the wife of dance-director Andy Lee ("a little Jew of ghetto extraction" [7]) who, however, is having an affair with Lorraine Fleming in the chorus (but it goes nowhere). Other characters (not in the film) include Mrs. Blair and her teenage daughter, Polly, who does acrobatic specialties (her mother colludes in the downfall of Dorothy Brock), and the ex-vaudeville comedian, Danny Moran, who secures a role in *Pretty Lady* although his wife and partner, Daisy, does not (Danny leaves her for the bright lights and Lorraine Fleming). In the novel, it is Abe Green, not Julian Marsh, who worries most about the success of the Broadway opening (Marsh has faded into the background), although the final word is left to Peggy Sawyer, fresh from her triumph as Brock's emergency replacement, who imperiously orders the assistant stage manager, Harry MacElroy, to tell her leading man not to start the second verse of their duet so soon in the future.

Even in the case of a Hollywood not yet strictly bound by the Motion Picture Production Code (created in 1930 but not enforced until July 1, 1934), some changes were going to have to be made to the novel. Warner Bros. had a typescript of it dated August 10, 1932 (378 pp.), and Whitney Boulton produced a "treatment" (38 pp.) by the 16th, which was revised by Bolton and James Seymour by the 22nd (22 pp.). Bolton and Seymour wrote a "temporary" script dated September 8 (198 pp.), redone by the 16th (152 pp.). Then Rian James (Julian Herbert Rothschild), a columnist on arts and entertainment for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and himself an author of gritty Broadway novels, was brought in to sharpen the focus, also with more zingy one-liners (though many were cut), in an undated final script (156 pp.). This was used for production, which began on September 28.[8] Inevitably, much of Ropes's narrative detail had to be removed (though a surprising amount remains): the chronology also gets compressed given that in the novel, Dorothy Brock has her accident after the opening night of the tryout in Philadelphia, and the second night gets canceled so that Peggy Sawyer can learn her part for the third (and Julian Marsh takes greater pleasure in "discovering" her, at Billy Lawler's suggestion).[9]

The changes gradually made through the treatments to the final script further included fleshing out the Marsh character (especially toward the end), softening Peggy Sawyer's, giving more prominence to Ann Lowell,[10] and anchoring events more firmly within the trials and tribulations of the Great Depression. Expanding the role of "Anytime Annie"—and merging into a single character the novel's Lorraine Fleming and Flo Perry (the chorus girl who most befriends Peggy Sawyer)—also enabled the plot of *42nd Street* to come closer to a type that Warner Bros. had established with one of its earliest backstage musicals, *Gold Diggers of Broadway* (1929): Fleming joins Lowell and Sawyer to produce a trio of chorus girls variously out to make their fortunes. The trope got repeated by Warner Bros. in subsequent *Gold Diggers* . . . musicals (. . . *of 1933*, . . . *of 1935*, etc.). In the case of *42nd Street*, Lowell is the most obvious "gold digger" of the three as she eventually takes up with the theater angel and sugar daddy Abner Dillon after he has dropped Dorothy Brock.[11] However, the script then redeems its version of the character by having Lowell sacrifice her chance to take the lead in *Pretty Lady* in favor of Sawyer, and the film tones down her money-grabbing tendencies still more.

Clearly some further rewriting took place during the shooting of the film, and other adjustments were then made in the editing room. Actor Lyle Talbot took the role of Geoffrey Waring—a friend of Pat Denning who arrives to offer him a job in stock theater in Philadelphia and catches Peggy Sawyer leaving his apartment after breakfast (shots 186–188, following the numbering in the script)—but the scene was cut. More significant, we shall see, was the progressive reduction of the role of an "old actor" (played by Henry B. Walthall). The rehearsal scene between the leads, with the playwright intervening pedantically in Brock's delivery (shot 123), was reworked during shooting itself to make it sharper, and other scenes may have been done in two versions: the script locates the one where Brock and Denning discuss their prior career in vaudeville on an out-of-the-way bench in Central Park (shot 113), but in the film it takes place in a restaurant (which makes more sense as Brock hands Denning money to pay the bill). However, this created a continuity problem, given that in the film, their prior scene in Brock's limousine (shots 88–90) ends with a generic "establishing shot" of the park that is in the wrong place and serves no purpose.

Presumably that was a slip-up in the editing room; there are other such continuity issues in the film, as well as awkward cuts to both the script and the film, at least one of which has a bearing on the final "42nd Street" number, as we shall see. Other scenes seem to have been shifted during editing as well: those two Brock–Denning encounters (shots 88–90 and 113), plus the one with Julian Marsh being prompted to recruit tough-guy

Slim Murphy to "persuade" Denning to disappear (shots 110–112), get shifted to after shot 134, meaning that we get a much more continuous sequence showing the auditions and early rehearsals for *Pretty Lady*: shots 73–84 (85–87 and 91–95 are cut) lead straight to 96–105 (106–109 are cut) and then 114–134 before the cast breaks for lunch. This lunch break also enables Brock and Denning to head off together for shots 88–90, but it puts what became their restaurant scene (formerly shot 113) and the intervening Marsh one (shots 110–112) at the wrong time of day, if anyone is paying attention.

While it is easy to pick such holes in *42nd Street*, it generally serves a purpose only if it exposes some broader problem that might have an impact on any reading of it. Likewise, it is important to remember that although the film is ostensibly about putting on a stage show, it remains a film. Indeed, in the burgeoning competition between Broadway and Hollywood with the advent of the talkies, each side needed to establish its own credentials for fear of losing audiences to the other. Thus the fact that the show (*Pretty Lady*) represented as being rehearsed and staged in *42nd Street* seems fairly awful may be part of the game. Warner Bros. was presumably happy to demonstrate that the studio could make a great musical film—as *42nd Street* is—by offering an alternative take on typical Broadway nonsense. Inevitably, however, there are more complex issues here ripe for the picking.

## "Jones and Barry Are Doing a Show!"

The final script specified the opening establishing shots (1–20) of midtown Manhattan zooming down to Forty-second Street (and in the script, aspects of the music-theatrical world), but it then headed straight into the action with the scenes between Dorothy Brock and Abner Dillon (shots 21–26), then Julian Marsh in the office of producers Al Jones and Thomas Barry (shots 27–38).[12] The film instead followed shot 20 with shots 39–52 (prior to shot 21) as multiple voices pass on the news that "Jones and Barry are doing a show!" That show is, of course, *Pretty Lady*. But one of the later cuts made to the script during filming is revealing. As Dorothy Brock rehearses her spoken lines in the presence of Julian Marsh and the unnamed author of the play (shot 123), she complains about a scene (on "page forty-two" of the script, so Marsh says) that is "completely out of character—makes me seem common." The playwright responds angrily: "But that's the twist, Mr. Marsh. This is *one* musical with a plot. Change this scene—and you might as well *throw away* the book!" This exchange is missing from the film, perhaps because it is impossible to determine on the basis of what we see in *42nd Street* precisely what the "plot" of *Pretty Lady* might be, the roles of those who play in it, or the purpose and location of most of the musical numbers.

The novel is no less vague in this regard. Its choice of title for the show is typical enough: short so as to fit on a marquee, likely to lure the crowds, and also sufficiently meaningless as to suit any circumstance. Parallel examples from popular Broadway shows from 1931 (the year before Bradford Ropes published his book) include the likes of *You Said It*, *America's Sweetheart*, *The Band Wagon*, *The Gang's All Here*, *Everybody's Welcome*, and *The Laugh Parade*: one might be hard pressed to identify on that basis which of them were musical comedies, revues, or somewhere between the two. *Pretty Lady* is even more obscure, however, given that in the film we only see fragments of the show as it proceeds from the first auditions through seemingly endless practice sessions to the dress rehearsal and then the opening night of the tryout in Philadelphia. One difficulty is caused by the very nature of any "backstage" musical (the "nightclub" one is different): the putting-on-a-show formula means that its musical numbers can only be seen when the show is, in fact, "put on," save when they might be presented in rehearsal, in which case their production will, by definition, be incomplete.[13] *42nd Street* in fact plays nicely with the rehearsal convention: we see the chorus learning the terrible "It Must Be June" number (which Julian Marsh quickly cuts from the show), and Dorothy Brock tries out "You're Getting to Be a Habit with Me" at the piano, and she then does it on the stage, after a fashion, in the dress rehearsal (or just before it). But the three production numbers in the film representing the opening night of *Pretty Lady*—"Shuffle Off to Buffalo," "Young and Healthy," and "42nd Street"—are run more or less directly one after the other at the end of the film, by which point any attempt to insert them into the dramatic frame of the show has gone by the wayside.

It is clear that "Shuffle Off to Buffalo" is close to being the opening number. Following the overture, the female dance-line enters with high kicks onto a set representing Grand Central Terminal (the real building is, of course, located on Forty-second Street). They are the girlfriends/wedding guests of the newly married leading lady (the role allocated to Dorothy Brock, replaced by Peggy Sawyer) and leading man (elsewhere in the script named John; played in the film by the uncredited Clarence Nordstrom) who have come to see them off on the night train to their honeymoon in Niagara Falls.[14] The girls welcome Sawyer to the stage; "John" notes the presence of a character called Jim (the best man at the wedding); and Sawyer has the line she has practiced with director Julian Marsh ("*Jim!* They didn't tell me *you* were here. It was *grand* of you to come!" [shot 326]). The set changes to the rear of a train for the duet "Shuffle Off to Buffalo" for Sawyer and "John"—although they should already have gone home to pack their "panties" and "scanties"—and it splits to reveal the interior carriage for their dance interlude, plus the chorus making pointed fun of the happy couple, also with stanzas for Lorraine Fleming and Ann Lowell. A languid arm emerges from behind the curtain of the sleeping berth and lets drop a pair of shoes, suggesting that the marriage is quickly consummated *en route*; those shoes fall alongside others being shined by the porter who, however, falls asleep, lulled by the rhythm of the train.[15]

"It Must Be June" is an Act I number according to the lead sheet shown in the film. We see it twice in rehearsal: first as the chorus learns the song, and then as it parades with garlands in formation, with Dorothy Brock and Billy Lawler front-stage-center in an embrace (one wonders how many would have spotted the visual reference to the "Garland Waltz" from Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*). Lawler's solo number, "Young and Healthy," also seems to come early in the show, so the script suggests:[16] it was meant to be heard in rehearsal (shots 203–205), as is Brock's Act II number, "You're Getting to Be a Habit with Me" (shot 149).[17] Somewhere in one or other act comes the line "Things can never be the same now" that Brock delivers diffidently, to the playwright's chagrin, in that offstage book-rehearsal as "John" (the leading man) looks on. The grand finale of the show is the "42nd Street" number: we hear the final choral chords in the dress rehearsal with "John" and Brock at center stage of a plausible city-street stage set, then Sawyer desperately trying to learn the song in a last-minute coaching session with Marsh.[18] However, its production as represented in the opening night of *Pretty Lady* is quite different.

Given the shallow plots of many Broadway musicals of the 1920s and 1930s, one could presumably create a story line for *Pretty Lady* that gets from an opening marriage between the leads to their final appearance in a song celebrating "42nd Street" with a few bumps along the way. One might even be able to figure out how the musical numbers would fit into it, although the script makes no effort to do so: while it indicates their position, it does not engage with their content save for "It Must Be June" (the lyrics are given complete),[19] and the script's vague descriptions of them are wholly generic. This is not surprising: there was no reason for the film's scriptwriters to know the songs intended for inclusion in *42nd Street* save perhaps that there would be some kind of final number for "Peggy and boys" (shot 354) that would be called "42nd Street" (shot 362). But even Julian Marsh seems confused about the plot of the show he is directing. As he tries to impress upon Sawyer the proper delivery of her "Jim. They didn't tell me . . ." line (shot 305), he urges her to "make it *mean* something": "You're greeting the man you love!" Clearly, she is not.

Even if that was regarded as not worth fixing in the script, there are other issues that perhaps should have gained greater attention. Dorothy Brock's status as the star of *Pretty Lady* is clear, but her leading man disappears completely from the opening-night performance after he has danced with Sawyer in "Shuffle Off to Buffalo." Where the character played by Billy Lawler in *Pretty Lady* fits into all this is anybody's guess: indeed, Lawler himself seems confused about it—"Do you suppose anybody'll even know I'm IN the show," he asks Sawyer (shot 219). Earlier, he had introduced himself to her as "one of Broadway's better juveniles" (shot 71)—Sawyer is disappointed that he is not someone "important"—but that does not explain why his character is embracing Dorothy Brock's in "It Must Be June." For the rest, while Lawler is a presence in the rehearsals—not least in terms of helping Peggy Sawyer head for stardom—he hardly participates in them save for a revealing (we shall see why) moment where he struggles in a dance-line and mutters disgustedly to Sawyer, "What do you do when you got two left feet like mine?" (shot 198). The obvious question is how he manages to end up in the final number of *Pretty Lady* (in its "opening night" version) and, indeed, cheek-by-cheek with the show's new leading lady at the end. The obvious answer is that "42nd Street" in its final rendition is not so much a conclusion to a show as to the film, but even here, the burgeoning romance between Lawler and Sawyer is not as clear as it ought to be.

## FACT AND FICTION

For all the patent foolishness of trying to make sense of *Pretty Lady*, its illogicalities are galling given that *42nd Street* otherwise takes great pains to recreate precisely the processes involved in putting on a Broadway show. The final script is clear that the contract signed by Dorothy Brock to star in *Pretty Lady* (for $1,200 per week) must be seen in close-up (as it is in the film) with "the proper legal phraseology (use genuine Equity contract, first paragraph)" (shot 24); it requires similar precision over press releases, typed scripts, and music scores. The auditions run as one would expect, with Julian Marsh (the general stage director, according to the contract we see him sign) mostly deferring to Andy Lee (dance director) as Mac Elroy (stage manager; styled MacElroy in the script) marshals the troops. The chorus girls get a typical salary of $35 per week, and Abner Dillon invests a plausible $70,000 in the show (and eventually pays more). For the first rehearsal call, the script gives Marsh the standard motivational speech, noting the grueling six weeks of rehearsal ahead (shot 102), although the film takes care to correct this to "five," which was the regulation period allowed by the Actors' Equity Association.[20] The dance director deals with the chorus in the musical numbers onstage while the principals rehearse the book (reading from "sides") in a separate room. Prior to the chorus learning "It Must Be June," we see a close-up shot of its musical lead sheet done in the standard way (a melody with some indications of the harmony), although the chorus members themselves hold just typed lyrics. Dorothy Brock fusses over the right key for "You're Getting to Be a Habit with Me" in rehearsal (Jerry, the pianist, transposes it by ear). The show moves to its tryout in Philadelphia at the right time and in a plausible space (the "Arch Street Theater" is the Trocadero at 1003 Arch St.), and this is where the cast first gets to work with the full sets and with the orchestra. Here Brock worries again about her song (an addition to the script), exhorting the conductor not to forget the modulation "on the last eight bars" (but there is none). Meanwhile, now that we are in a live theater rather than one being used just for rehearsal, the camera focuses with almost loving attention on the stagehands and carpenters, the ropes and levers, the chorus girls in scanty costumes shot from below, and even the instruments of the orchestra. This mania for accuracy is quite extraordinary; the voyeuristic tendencies, however, are typical of the backstage-musical genre.

That documentary approach gets taken still further. Songwriters Harry Warren and Al Dubin make a cameo appearance to express bewilderment as Marsh rejects "It Must Be June" ("That'll be enough of that. It smells!") because it seems like a song from 1905 (shot 133): Dubin protests "that number'll be a RIOT!"—to which Marsh makes the predictable witty response.[21] Warren must have taken great delight in writing so inept a melody, with its tiresome repetitions of two notes. The role of the rehearsal pianist (Jerry) is played by Harry Akst, a well-recorded song writer who also received composing credits for some of Warner Bros. earlier musicals:[22] thus he was able to vamp much of the rehearsal music heard in the film, including—one assumes—the dance-opener heard in Philadelphia (he also appears as the conductor of the orchestra). Even the actors themselves bore similarities to the plot: Warner Baxter (who plays Julian Marsh) had won an Academy Award as Best Actor in *In Old Arizona* (1929), but his career now seemed to be on the decline; Bebe Daniels (Dorothy Brock) had indeed starred in (film) musicals; Ruby Keeler (Peggy Sawyer) was herself looking for her first break; Dick Powell (Billy Lawler) was very much a "juvenile" whose role in Warner Bros. musicals was not yet properly defined (nor could he dance very well); George Brent (Pat Denning) had a not very successful career on the stage before being taken up by Hollywood; Una Merkel (Lorraine Fleming) tended to be typecast as wisecracking second leads; Ginger Rogers (Ann Lowell) had not yet found her place among the stars; George E. Stone (Andy Lee) had escaped the (Polish) ghetto and was an onstage song-and-dance man before appearing often as a seedy underworld figure in Warner Bros. gangster movies; and veteran Henry B. Walthall slotted perfectly into the role of what the script called an "old actor," although his part was cut significantly in the film. One suspects that their performances in *42nd Street* are so good precisely because they were acting out their lives.

That cut in Walthall's part, however, deprives us of a further passage from *Pretty Lady* that offers little in clarifying its plot but does provide some explanation for the show's final number. According to the script, in the dress rehearsal Marsh urges an "aged trouper veteran, dressed as an old-time cab driver" to rescue a show "dying on its feet" by way of his "patter scene" (a vaudeville term, though it usually involved two performers). The old man gamely heads for the footlights and delivers a nostalgic paean to "Forty-second Street! Sidewalks crowded with the ghosts of yesterday . . ." (shot 223): he continues with a list of those "ghosts"—almost all dead by 1932—including Eddie Foy, Raymond Hitchcock, Sam Bernard, David Warfield (with his famous catchphrase from Charles Klein's 1904 play, *The Music Master*: "If you don't vant her—I vant her"), Nora Bayes (singing "Shine On, Harvest Moon"), and "the master of them all," David Belasco.[23] But according to the script, the old vaudevillian then collapses and dies onstage, throwing *Pretty Lady* into still more last-minute disarray. Director Lloyd Bacon probably thought, quite rightly, that this was best left out of the film: the scene gets replaced by Dorothy Brock's second performance of "You're Getting to Be a Habit with Me," the relatively sparse staging of which seems to have been put together in a rushed attempt to plug a hole.

The death of the old trouper comes from the novel (228), but his evocation of Forty-second Street is new to the script. However, so sentimental an appeal to its "ghosts of yesterday" would also have taken the film in a very different direction. While Bradford Ropes chose the eponymous thoroughfare at the heart of New York's Theatre District for the title of his novel, it was more a concept than a location: his rehearsals in fact take place in what he calls the Forty-fifth Street Theatre, and his characters reside in permanent or temporary accommodation in various parts of Manhattan. The script and then the film, on the other hand, turned a generic space into a specific place, starting with the opening shots zooming down to street signs representing the crossings of Forty-second Street with its various north–south avenues. Sawyer's boarding house and Denning's apartment are at opposite ends of Forty-second Street—although in one scene (in the script; shots 158–159) they somehow end up on a bus going down Fifth Avenue (but they alight at the correct stop)—and Jones and Barry's office and Dorothy Brock's apartment each look out over it.[24] However, we hardly see the street in the film itself save for a stock through-the-window shot as Julian Marsh looks out from the Jones and Barry office, and then a fuzzy background projection through the rear window of a limousine. This is not surprising: no film musical of the 1930s was going to engage in significant location shooting. Nevertheless, the street looms large in the imagined world created here: for all its being an absent presence, it is very much the subject both of the film and, of course, of its grand finale, where what has hardly been shown in any real world gets recreated by way of a spectacular set and Busby Berkeley's dance direction.

But the lyrics of that final number put a different spin on the location: while the script's old vaudevillian may have recalled famed theatrical ghosts, the song instead celebrates the seamier side of a place "Where the underworld can meet the elite." We have not seen much of that underworld in the film itself save for Slim Murphy and his sidekick, hired by Julian Marsh to rough up Pat Denning and thereby dissuade him from further pursuing Dorothy Brock; nor is there yet much evidence of "Little nifties from the Fifties, innocent and sweet" and "Sexy ladies from the Eighties who are indiscreet" able to come from their respective city blocks in Manhattan to congregate in "Naughty, bawdy, gaudy, sporty Forty-second Street." The final production of the "42nd Street" number, however, seeks to explore the gamut of life west of Times Square. Now we have to engage with the consequences.

## SWEET OR INDISCREET?

Of course, none of the characters in *42nd Street* counts as "innocent and sweet," and most are "indiscreet" in one way or another as they pursue self-interest with all means at their disposal. As is typical of the theatrical profession, the air is sexually charged. When Andy Lee recognizes "Anytime Annie" Lowell—her nickname is bad enough—he exclaims, "Say—who could forget her! She only said no once, and then she didn't hear the question!" (shot 62). Lowell is, of course, able to give as good as she gets, although it is unclear whether her best wisecracks in the script got cut from the film for fear of offending audiences or of how they could disrupt the strongly masculine world those of her kind were forced to navigate.[25] Dorothy Brock is well aware of what the old soak Abner Dillon (played by Guy Kibbee in a role typical for him) wants in return for his financial backing of *Pretty Lady* (and she provides it for his equivalent in the novel), stringing him along the while, and by the end of the film, Lowell adopts the same strategy, although the film makes her seem less of a gold digger than the script. Pat Denning, on the other hand, comes close to taking advantage of Sawyer as she stays in his apartment until he is struck by a last-minute sense of guilt. But save for a few catty chorus girls, the women are shown as sticking together: Fleming and Lowell help Sawyer get into the chorus line, Lowell yields to Sawyer the chance to take the lead role in the show (this is an addition to the novel), and even Brock comes round to the idea that it is time for someone younger to take her place (another addition). For her, a broken ankle is what she needed to realize what matters in life: her relationship with Denning, whom she agrees to marry. Another marriage is also cued in the script (shot 350) as dance-director Andy Lee finally proposes to the woman who has been chasing him since before the auditions, Lorraine Fleming ("It's the only way I know—to keep you away from me"). But this gets cut from the film.

The reason for that cut seems clear enough. In the script, Lee's proposal comes as he and Fleming are watching Peggy Sawyer in the opening night of *Pretty Lady* from the wings (although there is no indication of what she is performing). But the day before, matters had taken a quite different turn. At the end of the dress rehearsal, an exhausted and disheveled Julian Marsh is left alone on the stage. As Lee and Fleming head together to the stage door (presumably on a dinner date), Marsh calls him aside, leaving Fleming in the lurch and, in the end, forgotten. He admits that he is a "sick man" close to a breakdown, and he places his arm around Lee's shoulders, seeking reassurance (shot 243): "I'm NOT a machine—Andy—and for the first time I'm counting on someone else—I've got to—I'm counting on YOU—and tomorrow night, Andy—we're going to give them a SHOW!" Lee responds encouragingly: "The best job Julian Marsh ever did!" The script then cues a dissolve to shot 244 (Denning meeting Sawyer outside the theater and taking her in a taxi to the cast party in the Congress Hotel). But the scene continues in the film as Marsh ends with a poignant pitch: "Come on home with me, will you? I'm lonesome."[26] "Sure," Lee says. It is hard to escape the meaning here: in a rather brave move, the film, in stark contrast to the script, explains why Lee has been resisting Fleming's advances for all this time. It is hardly plausible that he would propose to her the next day.

So overt a reference to Marsh's sexual preferences probably would not have passed the censors after the strict implementation of the Motion Picture Production Code on July 1, 1934. His affections are clear enough in Ropes's novel, but transferring them from Billy Lawler to Andy Lee freed Lawler (and, of course, Dick Powell) better to play the romantic juvenile in the film. Peggy Sawyer also carries baggage from Ropes's novel, however, where she is harder-edged, and more exploitative of the men she encounters. Successive iterations of the script increasingly distanced her hometown from New York (to New Jersey, Connecticut, and finally Sioux City, Iowa), although the film makes no reference to it.[27] But while she is the ingénue, she is not entirely ingenuous. She flirts with Terry Neil ("Terry Neill" in the novel), the louche chorus-dancer—although she resists being "pawed" by him at the cast party (shot 271)—and still more with Pat Denning, which stirs up Dorothy Brock's jealousy and indirectly causes her accident.[28] Indeed, as Sawyer recovers from her exhausted faint during rehearsal, she seems happy to rest her head on any shoulder (Neil's, Lawler's, or Denning's) making puppy-dog eyes the while. The film removed most of her interactions with Neil to try to mitigate the problem, and she no longer has breakfast with Denning after her night alone in his bedroom (shots 178–185; although in another continuity error, we see the table laid for it). But her falling for Lawler is quite different from their proposed relationship of convenience in the novel, and as a result, it needed far more work than even the script was prepared to give.

Indeed, the script almost entirely abrogated responsibility for that move to the final musical number. This would open with Sawyer "and the boys" followed by a solo spot for Sawyer (in a small, circular pool of light), and a full company tap finale. Shots 363–365 then contain the key action:

> FULL SHOT: STAGE
>
> as male members of company dance forward to, then back away from, Peggy. We see Billy start forward for his turn, dancing through lanes of company.
>
> CLOSE SHOT: PEGGY AND BILLY
>
> as they dance together. Their pantomime and significant glances tell us better than words that they are in love with each other.
>
> FULL SHOT: STAGE
>
> as grinning, ecstatic Billy dances back away from her to others in company. Lights begin to dim as chorus and principals drift and filter in wings. Finally the stage is dark and empty save for the patch of light in which Peggy is dancing down the curtain.

One of several problems here, however, is that while the scriptwriters might have thought it all very well to leave matters to "dancing," "pantomime," and "significant glances," the performance styles of Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler were too incompatible to allow it: Powell could sing but hardly dance, whereas Keeler was a hoofer with a less than perfect voice. Their duet number in *Gold Diggers of 1933*, "Pettin' in the Park," reveals them putting a brave face on an awkward situation, if with scant success: during Keeler's vigorous dance interlude, all Powell can do is mumble the lyrics tapping his knee, rising in the end to do a few awkward steps alongside her. In the case of *42nd Street*, he was much happier crooning to a "snooty little cutie," and a silent sex symbol (Toby Wing), in "Young and Healthy," which is the most irrelevant number in the film.

Again, an addition was made to the script to strengthen the romantic thrust. As Sawyer tries to relax between her frantic last-minute rehearsal and the opening-night curtain, Lawler brings her coffee. He makes a halting declaration of love in lines that are "new—for me—offstage . . ." (shot 312). Sawyer encourages him to say more but (in the script) is interrupted by a knock at the door (from Dorothy Brock). The film extends the moment, however. Lawler and Sawyer kiss passionately, and Sawyer makes best use of the line she has worked so hard to learn: "Billy. It was *grand* of you to come." One assumes that this would have provoked a few titters in the audience. And at that point, we are somewhat more ready to accept the conclusion of the final number, with a shot moving up the diagonally receding side of a "skyscraper" to reveal Lawler and Sawyer side by side at the top waving gaily to the audience, him whispering in her ear, then both coyly pulling down a "fire curtain" to close the "show," but not quite the film.

The full description of the "42nd Street" number in the script includes various "trick shots" (355–357) from the back wall of the auditorium, from underneath dancing feet and legs as if through plate glass, and from the second balcony over the heads of the audience. This suggests that even if the writers knew that Busby Berkeley would be in charge of the choreography, they had no idea of his intentions for it (if, indeed, he had any at that stage in the proceedings). One suspects that no one can have imagined the number as it turned out, although the result was not quite as original as some have claimed.

## "The Beat of Dancing Feet"

In the opening credits of *42nd Street*, Busby Berkeley is listed as having "created and staged" the dance ensembles, which is probably a fairer indication of his many strengths (and some weaknesses) than to call him a "choreographer." Berkeley famously said that all he knew about dancing had been learned just from watching chorus girls. He is also well known for having brought to the stage, and then to film, his experience as a field-artillery lieutenant during World War I supervising close-order drills involving fast precision movements by large cohorts of troops.[29] His sequence of seven musicals done for Warner Bros. between late 1932 and early 1935 (see Table 10.1)—from *42nd Street* to *Gold Diggers of 1935*—are often regarded as marking the first height of his career.[30] However, for the most part they draw on techniques already seen in the first film for which Berkeley acted as dance director, the Eddie Cantor vehicle produced by Samuel Goldwyn, *Whoopee!* (1930), which in turn was based on the 1928 stage musical produced by Florenz Ziegfeld Jr., for which Berkeley had also done the choreography. In *Whoopee!* we see the trademark drill lines tapping diagonally and cross-wise across the (sound-)stage (to maximize the illusion of space); the "from above" camera angles with dancers standing, sitting, or lying in circular formations to create elaborate kaleidoscopic patterns; the "parade of faces" (in that case, of the famous Goldwyn Girls); the use of props to exaggerate the highly regimented movements; and even the salacious "through the legs" trick shots. Berkeley's dancers do not so much dance as march, faster or slower, and with carefully calculated and coordinated motions of the legs and arms. They seem more like drone-automatons, which is an image to which I shall return.

Berkeley is also famous for starting out his dance numbers—at least in his "backstage" musicals—as if they were being done on a real proscenium stage before dissolving to a much larger and more lavish set (or sets) that could only be created in a film studio. The technique involved skilled camera work (Berkeley worked closely with cinematographers Sol Polito and then George Barnes) and special lighting effects, plus fantastical set designs (as with "By a Waterfall" in *Footlight Parade* of 1933) and whimsical inventions (the neon violins in *Gold Diggers of 1933* and waltzing pianos in *Gold Diggers of 1935*) aided by art directors such as Jack Okey and Anton Grot. In that context, however, the dance numbers in *42nd Street* seem for the most part to be rather tame. "You're Getting to Be a Habit with Me" gets a somewhat minimalist version of conventional stage choreography; and while "Young and Healthy" plays with the typical Berkeley tropes—a "parade of faces," three revolving platforms in "wedding-cake" tiers, kaleidoscope formations in top-down view, and a through-the-legs shot—it is done in a visually constrained space (also with a brief shot of the audience to locate it in the theater) and even, perhaps, with a hint of self-mockery as the Ginger Rogers character (who unexpectedly appears in the lineup) gives a knowing smile to the Dick Powell one. "Shuffle Off to Buffalo" is also set almost entirely as a stage number with the camera positioned (for the most part) from the point of view of the audience (which we glimpse briefly): the rear of the train that then opens out to reveal the interior carriage is certainly a neat effect, but it could have been done in a theater, save for the cutaway shots to the bathrooms at either end of the Pullman. All this is, of course, in keeping with the theatrical realism that *42nd Street* requires for its plot: it is about putting on a stage show, and one threatened with collapse right up to its opening. "You're Getting to Be a Habit with Me" was never going to bring down the house.

While the final "42nd Street" number might seem closer to any expectation of the Berkeley treatment, it, too, stays within a strong theatrical frame. Ruby Keeler steps through a front curtain to begin the song; the curtain opens to reveal a stock city backdrop; she starts her tap routine on a stage floor that turns out to be the roof of a taxi cab (from which she is forced to clamber down, somewhat awkwardly) that drives off left, with Keeler on the running board (the last time we see her in the number until the very end). We then get a trucking shot with cameos illustrating different aspects of life for oddball characters on "Naughty, bawdy, gaudy, sporty Forty-second Street" (some were dropped from the final cut), whether on the street itself or as seen looking into its windows: a woman getting a facial in a beauty parlor on the first floor of the Guillbert Hotel; a nanny rhythmically patting her baby (clearly a doll) on the behind at the entrance to the Shelton Apartments; fruit-sellers taking a break to go and play golf; a drunk emerging from the Hotsy Totsy Club; patrons outside a dance hall admiring two hoofing African American boys; streetwalkers entering the Enterprise Hotel; a young woman assaulted, doing a swan dive off a window ledge, and then murdered. Dick Powell looks on from out of the window of a second-floor speakeasy (we are still in the era of Prohibition) as he picks up the words of the song.

Thus far the sequence has been somewhat geographically challenged, not helped by further continuity problems (the same drunk emerges from the same basement Hotsy Totsy Club in two different locations). The street scene may have started plausibly enough in front of the entrance to a Broadway (BMT) Subway/Interborough Subway station; we also later get a (painted) view of a Forty-second Street tram under what seems to be a misplaced representation of the elevated IRT Sixth Avenue Line. But the Hotsy Totsy Club, the scene of a famous gangland double murder in July 1929, was on the second floor, not in the basement, of a building at 1721 Broadway between Fifty-fourth and Fifty-fifth Streets. There was also no "Guillbert" Hotel in New York, though the "Gilbert" Hotel in Hollywood was just down the road from the Shelton Apartments there (on 1550 and 1735 Wilcox Ave. respectively). As the sequence continues (after Powell's intervention), with an abrupt shift to nighttime lighting, a large group of formation dancers appears on what seems represented as the block on Forty-second Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, with the Republic Burlesque Theatre (also known as Minsky's)—it was repeatedly threatened with forced closure in late 1932 and early 1933[31]—if with an implausibly distant view of the sign for the New Amsterdam Theatre (in the same block, in fact). But at least a Manhattan cityscape emerges as the chorus manhandles cutouts of skyscrapers up a set of stairs that itself transforms (quite spectacularly) into the reclining wall of a towering skyscraper (not to be found on Forty-second Street, however) for the final shot.

Any attempt to pin down the accuracy of the places represented in the "42nd Street" number is, of course, absurd. What is most striking about this variously plausible (or not) representation of Forty-second Street and its environs, however, is that it so obviously remains theatrical, with painted backdrops, fake frontages, and a street that is clearly still a stage floor even with motorized traffic and a mounted policeman. Likewise, the final sequence as the chorus moves up the steps, turns to reveal the cityscape, and parts sideways to allow the steps to become the skyscraper could be done in a Broadway theater with a deep enough stage. Berkeley does not so much replace the theatrical with the cinematic as magnify it. This again fits with the gritty realism of *42nd Street* as a whole: the final number could indeed be part of a stage show, if not as we briefly see it at the end of the dress rehearsal of *Pretty Lady*. But it also reveals one obvious intertext, and suggests another.

Following its success with Al Jolson in the part-talkie *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and *The Singing Fool* (1928), Warner Bros. made film musicals a staple of its portfolio in 1929, when the company was issuing one or more new films each week (also including Westerns, thrillers, and dramas), some still in the part-talkie format and some taking advantage of the improved two-tone Technicolor process. The musicals ranged from star vehicles such as *Say It with Songs* (Jolson again), *Honky Tonk* (Sophie Tucker), *Paris* (Irène Bordoni), and *Smiling Irish Eyes* and *Footlights and Fools* (Colleen Moore); Broadway operetta (*The Desert Song*) or musical comedies (*So Long Letty*; *Little Johnny Jones*); and a series of backstage musicals on the chorus-girl-makes-good formula, including three released in fairly close succession during the summer—*Broadway Babies* (June 30), *On with the Show!* (July 13; though it had premiered in New York on May 28), and *Gold Diggers of Broadway* (August 30). The latter two were in color, as for the most part was the massive compilation revue, *Show of Shows*, with which the studio ended the year, featuring "100 stars" and "1000 beauties." Those stars and beauties soon faded, but the production team included many who would remain part of the Warner Bros. "musical" team (though they were jacks-of-all-trades), including directors Mervyn LeRoy and Lloyd Bacon, cameraman Sol Polito, and dance director Larry Ceballos. The stock formulas were both conventional and oft repeated. Thus *Show of Shows*—in competition with MGM's *The Hollywood Revue of 1929* (in which Ukulele Ike sang "Singin' in the Rain")—included a "Military March" with cadets led by the Pasadena American Legion Fife and Drum Corps doing tight formation moves on a set of steps, plus "Larry Ceballos' Black and White Girls" in a routine that played off two groups of female dancers, one in costumes with black fronts and white backs, and the other the reverse. Ceballos was an important choreographer, and his influence on, and rivalry with, Busby Berkeley, have not yet been fully appreciated in the literature: they both provided dance routines for the Warner Bros. *Footlight Parade* of 1933, though Ceballos was denied screen credit and sued.[32] Moreover, Ceballos's final number for the 1929 *Gold Diggers of Broadway* had a significant impact on "42nd Street."[33]

Ceballos set that number explicitly on a proscenium stage: the opening shot is from the fly loft with an off-camera director exhorting the performers to put their best feet forward. The backdrop is a spectacular modernist-style representation of Parisian landmarks, and the main set consists of a set of stairs set at a slight angle across the stage. Male and female dance-lines strut periodically—and rather purposelessly—down and up, or form a group toward the front tapping furiously the while, while various dance specialties and acrobats take turns on the apron over a ragbag medley reprising songs from earlier in the film: "Song of the Gold Diggers," "Tip-toe through the Tulips," "Painting the Clouds with Sunshine," and "Mechanical Man." The result is colorfully chaotic, if rather splendid in its own way.[34]

Berkeley had a single, much better song with which to work. His starker black-and-white treatment of the same tropes adds the complex trucking shot along the street, does away with the specialties (save those boy hoofers), gives the set of steps a purpose by way of two stunning transformations (the cutout cityscape and then the receding skyscraper), and treats the urban environment as a dynamic entity rather than a mere backdrop, creating a visual "rhapsody of laughter and tears" (the young woman assaulted and murdered) required by the song. One might plausibly link this with emerging notions of the pleasures and perils of city life in the late 1920s and early 1930s. But Berkeley's mechanized dance formations also invoke the more dystopic image of the faceless worker-drones trudging in long lines to and from their underground labors in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927; released in New York on March 6).[35] As in other of the Warner Bros. musicals from 1933 to 1935, German Expressionist cinema lies not far from the surface: compare the "My Forgotten Man" number in *Gold Diggers of 1933* (with Joan Blondell in a Lotte Lenya–style pose), and the opening of "Lullaby of Broadway" in *Gold Diggers of 1935*, which makes an obvious visual reference to Georg Pabst's *Die Büchse der Pandora* (1929).[36] As the whole of *42nd Street* makes clear, there was a great deal of mindless drudgery and exploitation involved in working in the theater: "Watch that tempo—watch it! Get those feet off the floor! Get into it now! Faster—faster!" shouts Marsh (shot 138), driving his dancer-drones to exhaustion and beyond. One wonders whether the $35 in any chorine's pay packet at the end of the week was worth the pain, although many would have been glad of it during the brutal times of the Great Depression.

## "A New Deal in Entertainment!"

One of the advertisements for *42nd Street* makes the political context clear.[37] The image itself promised more titillation than the film in fact delivers—the see-through costume of the principal female figure never appears—and the text is typically hyperbolic:

> Super-drama—super-spectacle! Two mighty shows in one! . . . Gripping story of playgirls and p[l]ayboys . . . Packed with love-thrills and wonderful music . . . Gorgeous pageant of beauty—pulsating with passionate rhythm . . . Filled with surprises! . . . The Greatest Show of 1933!

It also lists "14 stars" and promises "200 girls" in what would be "the most talked-about picture of the year." But the eye-catching headline offers still more: "Inaugurating a NEW DEAL in ENTERTAINMENT!" The connection with Franklin D. Roosevelt's promise of "a new deal for the American people" as a response to Depression-era hardships is obvious enough. He made it when accepting the Democratic nomination for president at the party's national convention in Chicago from June 27 to July 2, 1932, and he moved quickly to implement its agenda following his victory in the November 1932 elections and his inauguration as US president on March 4, 1933, less than one week before the official opening of *42nd Street*. But the film itself is full of a range of topical and timely references, some of which may just be in-jokes, though others clearly have greater significance.

For example, we first see Dorothy Brock in her apartment as Abner Dillon looks over her contract. She is bored enough to have picked up a not very current issue of the *New Yorker* magazine (in fact, the one dated February 20, 1932): the back cover contains an advertisement for White Rock mineral water and ginger ale ("For dinner (and after dinner) enjoyment"), reminding us that this is the era of Prohibition, although plenty of alcohol is consumed in more private settings in the film.[38] The title of "Shuffle Off to Buffalo" plays on the name of a basic tap-dance step. The "Congress Hotel" that is the site of the cast party in Philadelphia may be a reference to the eponymous hotel in Chicago that served as Roosevelt's campaign headquarters during the 1932 Democratic National Convention. The ending of "You're Getting to Be a Habit with Me" makes a ham-fisted attempt to invoke the current American fascination with Mahatma Gandhi—Brock rejects the rather fey chorus boys to exit arm-in-arm with a look-alike—who was constantly in the news, and especially during his prison fast that forced the signing on September 24, 1932, of the Poona Pact (granting electoral constituencies for the so-called Depressed Classes in India).[39] In the "42nd Street" number, the "Buy an apple a day" seller in front of the BMT station would probably have been recognized by New Yorkers, at least, as a nod to the campaign in the last quarter of 1932 urging them to do just that so as to provide farmers with relief from a glut.[40]

Other references here, however, seem more in the manner of in-jokes within the studio. As the drunk emerges from the Hotsy Totsy Club (for the first time), the image shifts to a newspaper seller holding an "Extra!" edition of the *Daily News* with a large-print headline noting that an attorney will make a statement on the Kernell "murder case": this is a reference to the Warner Bros. 1929 film *In the Headlines* (the plot concerns the double murder of brokers Kernell and Randall).[41] The "Reticker's" soda shop seen in the second part of the sequence was probably named by Hugh Reticker, active in the Warner Bros. art department, who may have had a hand in designing the set.[42] Underneath the marquee for the Republic Burlesque Theatre is a poster for the "Hollywood Theatre," the lavish Warner Bros. movie palace at 237 West Fifty-first Street. The prone skyscraper seen in the final shot, on the other hand, bears a more than passing resemblance to the Empire State Building, which in an RKO film playing concurrently with *42nd Street* in New York had another star at its peak: King Kong.[43]

Another theater marquee seen briefly in the "42nd Street" sequence, however, has a different resonance: it advertises the show *Who Cares*, which in fact ran briefly at Chanin's 46th Street Theatre from July to August 1930. One suspects that the title is used because of its invoking the most timely topic permeating *42nd Street*. Bradford Ropes's novel tended not to pay much attention to the Great Depression save by inference (theatrical professionals struggling to make a life in harsh economic circumstances), but the scriptwriters for the film gradually turned it into a constant presence. Julian Marsh is forced to take on *Pretty Lady* against the advice of his doctor because he has lost his money in the Wall Street Crash (shot 37): "this time I'll sock my money away so hard they'll have to blast to find enough to buy a newspaper! THAT's why I'm going ahead with *Pretty Lady*!" The cast is desperate at the thought of the show not opening because of Dorothy Brock's accident: as Lorraine Fleming says with a sour grimace (shot 295), "Well, that's Africa!" (a phonetic euphemism; cut in the film). When Abner Dillon threatens to withdraw his funding for the show in disgust at Brock's behavior, Marsh reminds him that on his decision rests the fate of "two hundred other people besides . . . Chorus girls, boys, electricians" (shot 268). Marsh repeats that figure in his increasingly desperate motivational speech before Peggy Sawyer goes on stage for opening night (shot 324): "Two hundred people—two hundred jobs—two hundred thousand dollars—five weeks of grind—and blood and sweat—depend on you. It's the life of all these people who have worked with you." For all the hyperbole, the message is clear: "you're going out a youngster—you've GOT to come back a star!"

None of this is in the novel. But that speech sticks in the memory, as does the grind, blood, and sweat of those arduous rehearsals. Some nuance is added, however, by one shot in the "42nd Street" number that was cut in the film but is still visible in other promotional material associated with it. One of the characters in the trucking shot (just prior to the dance-hall patrons watching the boy hoofers) is a street cleaner who sits on his cart in an improbable white uniform reading, no less improbably, a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* (see Figure 10.1). Unlike the fake *Daily News* headline on the "Kernell" case, however, this was the real thing: we see the full first page of the issue dated Monday, November 7, 1932. The titles of the articles bear mixed messages: "Jobs in Detroit Exceed Year Ago," "Con. Gas Sales Hold Up Well," and "Illinois Coal Mines to Be Using 32,000 Men," but "$3,000,000 Loss Likely for Deere in Year." One further caption draws the

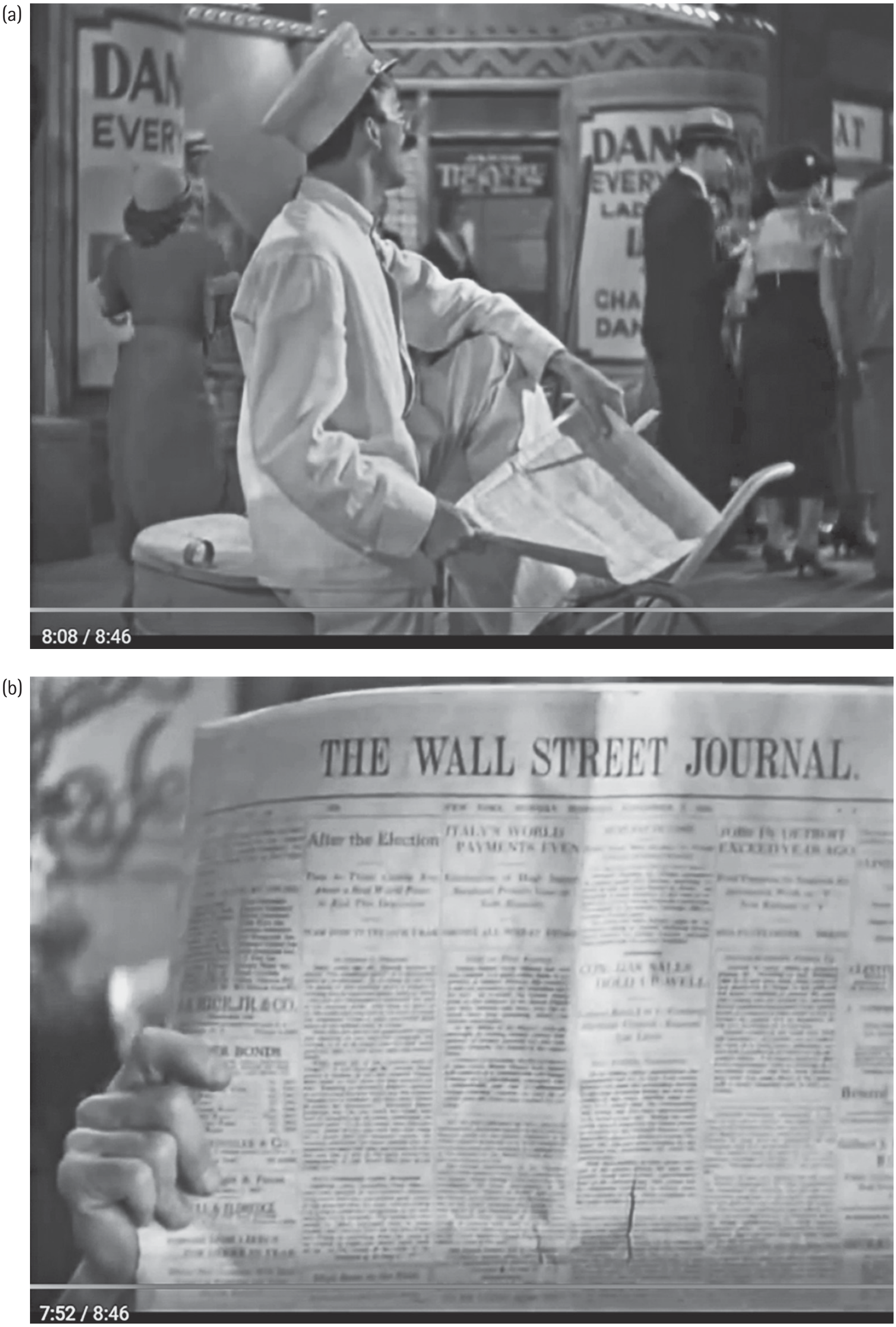
(a)
DAN
EVERY
DAN
EVERY
LAD
CHA
DAN
8:08 / 8:46
(b)
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
After the Election
ITALY'S WORLD PAYMENTS EVEN
7:52 / 8:46

**FIGURE 10.1** (top) The street cleaner in "42nd Street" (cut in the film; taken from *Harry Warren: America's Foremost Composer* [Warner Bros., 1933], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDlnp88oLds>, at 8m08s); (bottom) the newspaper (Wall Street Journal, Monday 7 November 1932) held by the street cleaner (from ibid., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDlnp88oLds>, at 7m52s) eye, however: "After the Election: Time to Think Clearly Now About a Real World Peace to End This Depression." That issue came out one day before the 1932 elections swept President Roosevelt into power. It tells us something about the chronology of setting up the "42nd Street" number in the studio (it was shot on November 12–15).[44] But it also suggests that the "naughty, bawdy, gaudy, sporty" aspects of Forty-second Street represented not so much the present as a past that would soon enter the realms of nostalgia.

Jack Warner had been chairman of the motion-picture division of the 1932 Democratic campaign, and his publicity department quickly jumped on the "New Deal" bandwagon. It partnered with the General Electric Company to create the "42nd Street Special," a train that wended its way from Los Angeles across the country carrying Warner Bros. stars (including Tom Mix and Bette Davis) and various GE products, stopping for showings of the film along the way (the first was in Denver on February 23). It arrived in Washington, DC, for President Roosevelt's inauguration (there was a "42nd Street" float in the parade) and reached New York in time for the official premiere of the film (on March 9) at the Warner Strand Theatre (on the corner of Broadway and Forty-seventh Street). This opening had been preceded by a benefit showing the previous evening for (significantly enough) the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform.[45] All that publicity paid off: *42nd Street* became one of the most successful films of 1933. It was also a bargain for the studio, bringing in an estimated gross of $2.25 million on a production budget of $439,000 (double or more the cost of a typical Warner Bros. gangster film, but $100,000 less than it had spent on *Gold Diggers of Broadway*): for comparison, *Whoopee!* of 1930 earned $2.65 million but cost $1.3 million.[46]

Warner Bros. continued the pro-FDR propaganda in its next Busby Berkeley spectaculars: *Gold Diggers of 1933* (released on May 27, 1933) and *Footlight Parade* (premiered on September 30, 1933).[47] Opening *Gold Diggers of 1933* with "We're in the Money" may have seemed premature in retrospect, and its "My Forgotten Man" number (reportedly inspired by the war veterans' march on Washington, DC, in the summer of 1932, which was being repeated on a smaller scale in May 1933) certainly packs a powerful political punch.[48] But the final scene of *Footlight Parade* is a remarkable visual tribute to the National Recovery Administration (established by the National Industrial Recovery Act, signed into law by President Roosevelt on June 16, 1933): Berkeley's march formation creates a stunning representation of the NRA's iconic "Blue Eagle" with a gear in its right talon and lightning bolts in its left one, which was declared a symbol of the NRA on July 30.

All these topical references in *42nd Street* and its immediate successors make these films very specific to their time and place. The 1980 stage adaptation of *42nd Street* (it opened on August 25) struggled as a result in terms of both its content and its structure, although it was, and remains, hugely successful at the box office. The idea of turning film musicals into stage ones had not proven very successful in the case of the 1973 *Gigi* (based on the 1958 hit), and the 1982 *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (the film came out in 1954) was also a flop. But in the case of the stage version of *42nd Street*, producer David Merrick sought to build both on the decade's nostalgia for the 1920s seen in the successful revival (1971) of Otto Harbach and Vincent Youmans's stage musical, *No, No, Nanette* (1925), and on the electrifying rejuvenation of the backstage-musical formula in *A Chorus Line* of 1975 (directed and choreographed by Michael Bennett). The book (by Michael Stewart and Mark Bramble) needed to reconfigure the original script, especially in terms of the relationship between Peggy Sawyer (from Allentown, Pennsylvania) and Julian Marsh, who is in love with her: Billy Lawlor (*sic*) is more obviously the leading man of *Pretty Lady* but otherwise disappears into the background. Moreover, the four songs of the film were not going to be enough for a stage show: several others were added from the Harry Warren songbook (including "We're in the Money," "Keep Young and Beautiful," "I Only Have Eyes for You," "Lullaby of Broadway," and, for the 2017 revival, "Boulevard of Broken Dreams"). In addition, they needed to be front-ended in Act I, meaning that they also extend beyond the straightforwardly diegetic function of the numbers in the film. The result seems to reflect a very different political context—the increasing disillusion in the administration of Democratic president Jimmy Carter (Ronald Reagan swept the board in the November 1980 election)—compared with the film's hopes for the New Deal under President Roosevelt. But something was lost in the process.

In the script of the film of *42nd Street*, the final shots (366–367) reveal a bedraggled Julian Marsh outside the side entrance to the theater as the well-heeled members of the audience pour out after the end of *Pretty Lady* (the novel ends differently, we have seen). He overhears their comments praising Sawyer but accusing him of no doubt intending to take all the credit both for his discovery of her and for the entire production. He flips his cigarette into the alley and smiles grimly—"Just another show!"—then yawns and falls asleep. The film cuts the comment: Marsh simply shakes his head ruefully and eases himself down onto the fire-escape stairs.[49] But *42nd Street* clearly was not intended to be "just another" film musical: it set a standard that would be hard to beat.

## NOTES

1. The "final" script of the film is transcribed in Rian James and James Seymour, *42nd Street*, edited by Rocco Fumento, "Wisconsin/Warner Bros. Screenplay Series" (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), which also has a useful introduction; references to this script are cued by its shot numbers, and quotations from it and elsewhere have been lightly edited (e.g., in terms of punctuation, etc.) without comment. The best overview of the creation and context of the film is in J. Hoberman, "*42nd Street*," in *British Film Institute Film Classics*, edited by Edward Buscombe and Rob White, vol. 1 (London and New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2003), 197–220 (Hoberman's essay was first published in 1993). I am most grateful to Geoffrey Block and to Dominic Broomfield-McHugh for providing further information and ideas on the film as I prepared this essay for publication.
2. The arrangement with Berkeley was firmed up still further on November 18, 1932, that is, shortly after the end of shooting *42nd Street*; see Michael LaRocco, "Larry Ceballos as Busby Berkeley: The Credit Dispute in *Footlight Parade* and the Branding of 'Buzz,'" *Film History* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 141–163, at 145.

3. Warner Bros. musicals from this period not involving Berkeley include *Twenty Million Sweethearts* (Dick Powell, Ginger Rogers; May 26, 1934), *El cantante de Napoles* (Enrico Caruso, Carmen Rio; February 22, 1935), and three with Bobby Connolly directing the dance ensembles: *Flirtation Walk* (Dick Powell, Ruby Keeler; November 28, 1934), *Sweet Adeline* (Donald Woods, Irene Dunne; December 29, 1934), and *Sweet Music* (Rudy Vallée, Ann Dvorak; February 23, 1935).
4. Zanuck is quoted in Mel Gussow, *Don't Say Yes until I Finish Talking* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 55. However odd the remark might seem, it fits with the legend that Zanuck pretended to a skeptical Jack Warner that he was making two films, one a musical but *42nd Street*, not; Hoberman, "*42nd Street*," 203.
5. In fact, several of the leads announced for the film by Warner Bros. on September 8, 1932, did not appear in it, also including Warren William (Julian Marsh), Kay Francis (Dorothy Brock), and Glenda Farrell (Lorraine Fleming); see Hoberman, "*42nd Street*," 202.
6. Given in Hoberman, "*42nd Street*," 203.
7. One edition of Ropes's novel appeared in 1932 (New York: Alfred H. King), plus a "PhotoPlay" one in 1933 (New York: Grosset and Dunlap); page references here are to the former. There is a (slightly inaccurate) summary of it in James and Seymour, *42nd Street*, 9–10; see also Drewey Wayne Gunn, *Gay American Novels, 1870–1970: A Reader's Guide* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016), 29–30.
8. For these materials, see James and Seymour, *42nd Street*, 14–19, 196. They all survive in the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research. There are also production records for the film in the Warner Bros. Archives, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California, Los Angeles. Given that these documents are to be the subject of a forthcoming study by Geoffrey Block, I have tended to rely on Fumento's account of them here.
9. The end of the novel also fast-forwards to opening night on Broadway.
10. However, her monocle and Pekingese dog come from another chorus character, Diana Lorimer, in the novel (29, 32).
11. The Abner Dillon character in the novel, Richard Endicott, is likewise dropped by Brock, but the consequences are left unclear.
12. Jones and Barry lost their original Jewish names as the script went through development.
13. Compare, for example, the location of the song-and-dance routines in *Wonder Bar* (Warner Bros., 1934), which is in the "nightclub" format (with Al Jolson as the emcee).
14. The leading man is named John Phillips in the novel; he has no full name in the film.
15. Typically, the porter is one of two African American characters in the film; the other is Dorothy Brock's maid, Pansy (played by an uncredited Louise Beavers).
16. In the script, shot 341 has Sawyer and "John" enter the wings following their duet ("Shuffle Off to Buffalo") and Marsh deliver another motivational speech before sending her to the dressing room to "relax." Shots 342–349 are Lawler's number (shot 345—not in the film—has Sawyer smiling happily as she hears it). Shots 350–353 contain other action; Sawyer starts the final number in shot 354. The film cuts straight from the end of "Young and Healthy" to the beginning of "42nd Street."
17. The song's position in Act II seems clear from shot 142: Brock's rehearsal of her song follows her complaint to Marsh that "If you're *never* going to rehearse me in the second act, I'd like to go home" (this is cut in the film).
18. The script (shot 306) instead has her struggling with her "duet" (i.e., "Shuffle Off to Buffalo").

19. The lead sheet of "It Must Be June" shown in close-up on the film is headed "Music and words by Harry Warren," which may or may not be true for the words. The novel contains a number of no less cringeworthy lyrics for a few of the songs in *Pretty Lady*.
20. The actual timing of the rehearsals varies between the script and the film. In the script (following the novel), they take place in late July through August (therefore planning for a New York opening at the start of the season just after Labor Day); the script has various date-fixing (and time-passing) strategies, including ripping off pages of a pad calendar. In the film, however, Dorothy Brock's contract, issued before the rehearsals begin, is visibly dated August 29, 1932, and in general, the film is less concerned with chronological exactitude.
21. The script gives the line to "Conroy," the putative composer of *Pretty Lady* (he is Russell Conroy in the novel).
22. Akst also appeared on screen as a song writer in Paramount's *June Moon* (1931).
23. Although Warfield lived to a grand old age (he died in 1951), his last known role on Broadway was as Shylock in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* from December 21, 1921, to March 6, 1922. The other names in the veteran's list all died between 1927 and 1931.
24. The script (shot 27) locates Jones and Barry's office in the Candler Building at 220 West Forty-second Street. That same shot also specifies the camera moving to pass the façade of the New Amsterdam Theatre (214 West Forty-second Street). Brock and Denning both have apartments in Tudor City (at the east end of Forty-second Street).
25. One of the better gags lost in the film is Lowell's response (shot 146) to the exhausted Lorraine Fleming's complaint of being "anemic": "Well, why don't you make the rat marry you?" Much of Lowell and Fleming's sexual banter gets cut, although other innuendoes remain. However, one suspects that Ginger Rogers's celebrated slip in "Shuffle Off to Buffalo" (beginning the word "belly"—rhyming with "Nellie"—but remembering that she was told to replace it with "tummy") was deliberate, and also deliberately left in the film.
26. Compare Leonard J. Leff, "'Come on Home with Me': *42nd Street* and the Gay Male World of the 1930s," *Cinema Journal* 39, no. 1 (Autumn 1999): 3–22. The ending to the scene appears to have been improvised during shooting (10–11).
27. In the novel, Sawyer is from Paris, Maine.
28. The relationship between Sawyer and Denning grows even stronger in the novel, as he starts to view her as a means of escape from the life of a gigolo, although he eventually drops her to return to Brock, then ends up going to Paris with Amy Lee.
29. For an overview, see Martin Rubin, *Showstoppers: Busby Berkeley and the Tradition of Spectacle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Jeffrey Spivak, *Buzz: The Life and Art of Busby Berkeley* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011).
30. Between *Footlight Parade* (1933) and *Fashions of 1934*, Berkeley returned to working for Samuel Goldwyn on *Roman Scandals* (released on December 25, 1933), a typical Eddie Cantor vehicle, although it did include the Warren–Dubin classic, "Keep Young and Beautiful."
31. "McKee Closes Two Burlesques in 42d Street," *New York Times*, September 20, 1932, 1–2; "Burlesques Told to End Obscenity," *New York Times*, May 16, 1933, 19.
32. The case of *Footlight Parade* is the subject of LaRocco, "Larry Ceballos as Busby Berkeley." Jeff Cohen, "The Dancing Masters," in *Vitaphone Varieties: Observations on Film, Music, and Imagery of the Past*, http://vitaphone.blogspot.com/2006/12/dancing-masters.html, also has some useful remarks on the influence of Ceballos and others on Berkeley.
33. *Gold Diggers of Broadway* is mostly lost, though we do have reels 9 (with the number "Tip-toe through the Tulips") and 10 (save the final minute) with the finale.

34. The novel also notes the shopworn convention: as Terry Neill says to Peggy Sawyer during the rehearsals of *Pretty Lady*, "An' the finale's all wrong. Dancin' on the stairs! Jeez, Wayburn did that fifteen years ago" (164). The reference is to Ned Wayburn, from 1915 the main choreographer of the *Ziegfeld Follies*.
35. In the novel, Sawyer makes a similar point in a conversation with Pat Denning: "In the chorus you are part of a machine, except for the fact that instead of coils and wires you possess joints and muscles which ache when you exert them too much. No matter how high your standard you're still only a cog in the works; there's no chance to be a definite personality; you must kick in time, bend in time, exit in time" (147).
36. Both of those *Gold Diggers* . . . films had the Polish émigré Anton Grot as their art director, who had strong Expressionist tendencies.
37. See the image at https://www.filmsite.org/fort3.html. It appeared as a full-page spread in, for example, *Photoplay* 43, no. 5 (April 1933): 7. There is an even more risqué advertisement (with a different text) at https://www.alamy.com (ref. PORE35).
38. A sign for "Firefly Club" ginger ale is seen later in the film through the window of Pat Denning's apartment (during shot 190 in the script).
39. As Cole Porter famously wrote in 1934, "You're the Top / You're Mahatma Gandhi," which he then rhymed somewhat wickedly with "Napoleon Brandy."
40. "Urging Eating 'An Apple a Day' to Aid Farmers of New York," *New York Times*, November 3, 1932, 7, reporting on the plea issued by Charles H. Baldwin (New York State Commissioner of Agriculture and Markets) to consume the state's recently harvested bumper crop of apples.
41. The newspaper is clearly "fake": the masthead is wrong, and whoever created it in the props department slipped up by not replacing the placeholder for the date in the (seemingly) stock template.
42. So https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0024034/trivia?ref_=ttgf_ql_1 suggests.
43. Hoberman, "*42nd Street*," 214, makes the connection.
44. For the shooting schedule, see Hoberman, "*42nd Street*," 202–203.
45. The WONPR was a powerful reform group: at its fourth annual conference in Washington, DC, in early April 1933, its founder, Pauline Sabine, claimed a national membership totaling 1,302,703; see "Ratification Next Goal of Women Wets," *Hartford Courant*, April 6, 1933, 3. Its efforts contributed to the ratification of the Twenty-first Amendment to the US Constitution, repealing Prohibition, on December 5, 1933.
46. These figures are taken from the relevant articles on Wikipedia. Hoberman, "*42nd Street*," 203, says that the film cost $379,000.
47. See the discussion in Mark Warner, "Some Warner Musicals and the Spirit of the New Deal," in *Genre: The Musical*, edited by Rick Altman (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 41–56.
48. The song also references Franklin D. Roosevelt's commitments to the "forgotten man" (i.e., "the infantry of our economic army"—the average small-town American) in a radio speech on April 7, 1932, on behalf of the Democratic National Committee; see Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, "The American Presidency Project," https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/288092.
49. Leff, "'Come on Home with Me,'" 19, reads this as another clue to Marsh's sexual orientation (cruising in dark alleys), helped by the underscoring of "You're Getting to Be a Habit with Me."

### CHAPTER 11

# WHEN FRED LOST GINGER

## *Thoughts on the Genesis and Legacy of* A Damsel in Distress

### GEOFFREY BLOCK

## Without Ginger

After *Follow the Fleet* in 1936, the fifth successive hit film since their sensational debut in *Flying Down to Rio* in 1933, Fred Astaire (1899–1987) instigated a five-film contract in which his partner, Ginger Rogers (1911–1995), could appear in no more than three of these films without his consent.[1] In the end Ginger would appear in four: *Swing Time* (1936), *Shall We Dance* (1937), *Carefree* (1938), and *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939)—two box-office wins followed by two losses. Before the April 1936 signing of the five-film contract Ginger had already appeared in three successful films without Fred. After *Shall We Dance* and before *Carefree*, she appeared in three more.

The sole film without Ginger encompassed in the contract, *A Damsel in Distress*, was released on November 19, 1937. One month earlier, Ginger had received second billing to Katharine Hepburn in the first of the three films between *Shall We Dance* and *Carefree*, the profitable *Stage Door*, a breakthrough film for both actresses. Seven months after the release of *Damsel*, Ginger received top billing in *Vivacious Lady*, which also made a comparable profit.[2] In contrast, the third film, *Having Wonderful Time*, lost $267,000, nearly four times more than either of the losses with Astaire, *Carefree* and *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*.[3] Meanwhile, *A Damsel in Distress* earned an unenviable distinction, becoming the first Astaire film to lose money.[4] The magnitude of the loss was $65,000, which while not exorbitant compared with *Having Wonderful Time* one year later, unfortunately fell on the heels of *Shall We Dance*, the most recent and least profitable of the first seven Fred and Ginger films.[5]

The same month as the Astaire-Rogers contract that eventually led to *A Damsel in Distress* and about nine months before George and Ira Gershwin began to embark on songs for the picture, a professional reader, presumably working for RKO, prepared a nine-page synopsis of P. G. Wodehouse's eponymous 1919 novel. The reader prefaced the synopsis with a summary that explains why Wodehouse's novel would work as a film for Fred Astaire. The name Ginger Rogers does not appear:

> This novel was filmed as a silent, in 1919, but is free from re-sale. It is one of the best of the Wodehouse tales, rather more logical than most and consistently amusing. The leading role, that of a famous American jazz composer who falls in love with an English girl he mistakenly thinks he is rescuing from a cruel family, is an excellent part for a young comedian and, changed to a famous American dancer, should fit Fred Astaire perfectly. There is everything here for a big, successful feature picture against a musical background not dragged in by the ears and with a strong appeal for Wodehouse's enormous following.[6]

In *Astaire Dancing*, John Mueller expresses his view that *Damsel* is "unjustly neglected" and assesses the film as "one of the most unrelievedly delightful films Astaire ever made."[7] Mueller goes on to praise the "nimble direction" of George Stevens, the "cheery script derived from the affectionately satiric novel by P. G. Wodehouse" (1881–1975), and especially the songs of George (1898–1937) and Ira (1896–1983) Gershwin, "probably the best ever written for an Astaire film—and, therefore, for any movie musical."[8]

Mueller's assessment is not the majority view. Despite considerable praise lavished on Astaire's dancing and the fine Gershwin score, much of the literature on *Damsel* tends to accentuate the negative. In particular, film critics, historians, and audiences have focused on the inadequacy of the actress who replaced Rogers, Joan Fontaine, nineteen years old during the film's shooting, and who did not sing or dance. The absence of singing and dancing are not the most appealing traits to bring to a film musical.

Some contemporary film critics welcomed the idea of a new partner. For example, *Variety*'s Abel [Green] wrote that "some may miss Ginger Rogers opposite Fred Astaire but to others it will be a novelty, and to both the producer and public a change was inevitable and probably a good idea."[9] The issue then, or now, wasn't the *idea* of a new partner, but the *choice* of partner. Indeed, *Variety* follows its glowing accolades for the "excellent cast" by damning Fontaine with faint praise: "Joan Fontaine is passively fair as the ingénue, nicely looking the role but otherwise undistinguished."[10] Other reviews, while bluntly stating that the leading lady can't dance, find Fontaine's beauty compensatory.

For Hermes Pan, who worked with Astaire on ten films and won an Oscar for his dance direction of the Fun House sequence in *Damsel*, beauty was not enough: "Joan Fontaine was no dancer at all. And I could never understand why they would cast Fred with Joan Fontaine. The poor girl couldn't even walk."[11] From Pan's perspective the only person not unhappy with Fontaine was Astaire who, according to Pan, "was so delighted to be on his own that he couldn't have cared less who he danced with."[12] Pan's interpretation of Astaire's state of mind is at odds with the recollections of director George Stevens, who stated in an interview that Astaire and producer Pandro S. Berman tried to persuade him to replace Fontaine but agreed at Stevens's urging to keep her and make the best of it.[13] In his autobiography, Astaire generously recalled that "Joan and I did only one dance together and she handled it beautifully."[14]

The problems with Fontaine go beyond her inability to sing or dance. Other problems include her acting and the way the screenplay develops Fontaine's character, both falling short of the high standards set in previous Fred & Ginger collaborations. Film historian Rick Altman gets to the heart of what many see as an insurmountable impediment, thus challenging Mueller's assessment that *Damsel* is an "unjustly neglected" and "unrelievedly delightful film": "Throughout the earlier period [i.e., films with Rogers from 1933 to 1936] Astaire was matched with a woman of his own generation and temperament, capable of bitingly clever repartée which only covered up a tender core. When the leading lady proved incapable of handling this screwball comedy-type role, the film was doomed from the start" (e.g., *A Damsel in Distress*, with Joan Fontaine).[15] For Altman, dancing is the essential missing ingredient: "Left to itself, the dialogue alone could never resolve the Astaire-Rogers conflict," and by casting the non-dancing Fontaine as the damsel in distress rescued by Astaire, the film was not allowed to transform "the competition of the screwball comedy dialogue into danced harmony."[16] In the absence of Ginger, even Astaire's truly great drum dance finale "Nice Work If You Can Get It" could not rescue *Damsel* when Astaire and Lady Alyce walk rather than dance into their future marital bliss.

On the first page of his *Confessions*, Rousseau famously stated that "my birth was the first of my misfortunes." The first of *Damsel*'s misfortunes was the casting of an inadequate replacement for Rogers, unable to fulfill, not only the singing and dancing demands of a musical film, but the acting demands necessary to transform comic repartee and romantic competition into a persuasive and satisfying plot.[17] How did this happen?

Perhaps not surprisingly, Fontaine was not the first choice. For Astaire biographers Bob Thomas and Peter J. Levinson, the list of potential actresses start with Carole Lombard, Alice Faye, and Ida Lupino.[18] In his autobiography Astaire mentions Ruby Keeler, explaining that she was not cast "because the part called for a more British type of girl."[19] Michael Feinstein recalled a conversation from 1979 with British singer-dancer Jessie Mathews in which she "regretted for the rest of her life" that her film company would not release her to make *Damsel*.[20]

Within a month after George Gershwin persuaded Berman to purchase the rights to Wodehouse's 1919 novel, which Berman did on January 19, 1937, the quest to find a replacement for Rogers had begun. The first person to be considered was apparently Harriet Hoctor, who specialized in metamorphosing her body into a human pretzel. Hoctor had revealed her talent for balletic contortionism as Astaire's partner (interestingly replacing Rogers) in the "Shall We Dance" finale of that film. A *New York Times* article on February 11 announced that Berman had decided to elevate Hoctor to a featured player and that "her first assignment has been set tentatively as Fred Astaire's leading lady in *A Damsel in Distress*."[21] On April 5 the *Times* documented RKO's desire "to borrow Carole Lombard from Paramount" and that Lombard had "read and approved the adaptation of the P. G. Wodehouse yarn and has expressed a desire to make the film."[22] Soon the *Times* shared unconfirmed reports "that RKO was planning an unusual combination in the top roles" with the addition of Katharine Hepburn as co-lead, a move that surprised Astaire who "believed he would be the only star."[23] In late June the *Times* reported that "money and attendant evils have blocked the signing of Ruby Keeler."[24] This seems to contradict Astaire's recollection, unless the lack of a proper British accent would be considered an "attendant evil."

In this same announcement *Times* readers learned that "probably today" (June 22) Fontaine, who had British parents but had been raised in California since before turning two, would be assigned as Astaire's leading lady. The notice also reported that Fontaine "has been rehearsing with Astaire and her progress has been sufficiently gratifying to make the assignment tentative."[25] A notice in the June 25 *Times* offers additional context.[26] Once the assignment was elevated from tentative to settled, Pan coached Fontaine on her single dance number, "Things Are Looking Up," "from the end of June through the middle of September."[27] During the final weeks of this ordeal, Astaire joined Fontaine, Pan, dance coach Angela Blue, and rehearsal pianist Hal Borne. Sometime between mid-September and the filming of the elaborate Fun House song and dance sequence with Astaire, Burns, and Allen between October 3 and 7, Fontaine's sole contribution to the dancing in *Damsel*, a total of three minutes and forty-six seconds, was finally recorded on film.[28]

The absence of Rogers and, more significant, the decision to cast a leading lady who didn't sing and hardly danced led to a number of other consequential casting decisions, in particular, which actors and actresses could complement and support Astaire. If Fontaine wouldn't sing, who would? Rogers was rarely featured as a vocal soloist in the series, but after she and Fred made their joint debut dancing "The Carioca" in *Flying Down to Rio*, audiences could count on Ginger to sing. In fact, aside from a few exceptions here and there, it was unusual for anyone *other* than Fred or Ginger to be featured as singers or dancers.[29] The main exception to this principle was Irene Dunne, who sang the big ballads in *Roberta* including "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" but was not expected to dance.

A *New York Times* news item from June 17 announced that "George Burns and Gracie Allen have been borrowed from Paramount by RKO to appear with Fred Astaire in his first solo starring film, *A Damsel in Distress*."[30] Prior to the hiring of Burns and Allen, Berman had signed the eclectic Charley Chase (born Charles Parrott) to play Astaire's valet in a role not unlike the character played by comedian Eric Blore in *Top Hat*.[31] Chase was an actor, director, and screenwriter acting in and writing for many silent films, starting as a comedian in Mack Sennett's Keystone Cops and several Charlie Chaplin films, after which he directed and wrote films for Hal Roach Studios.[32] Chase's singing ability helped him make the transition to the talkies where he played supporting roles in numerous films until his death at forty-seven in 1940. In contrast to the non-singing Blore, Chase was able to prepare a song-and-dance routine with Astaire before he had to step down due to ill health.

According to Chase biographers Brian Anthony and Andy Edmonds, Chase was also serving on Berman's payroll "as script consultant on the comedy routines."[33] Proof of the latter can be found in the RKO Production Files at UCLA, which has preserved a five-page "Suggested Treatment" of *Damsel* dated May 29, while Chase was also rehearsing his number with Astaire. Contradicting Anthony and Edmonds, the script mentions Burns and Allen by name, the former playing a publicity agent much as he does in the final screenplay and Allen a chorus girl in George Bevan's (Astaire's) show. The date and content of Chase's "Treatment" suggests, not only that Chase may have dropped out before June, but that Burns and Allen were on Berman's radar weeks before their contract was announced.

A press notice on May 21 announced that "negotiations were under way" with Harry Lauder, the legendary Scottish comedian and singer, now approaching seventy.[34] Although on the verge of retirement, Lauder starred in a British musical film comedy released in December 1936, which suggests that his casting in a film set in an English castle would not have been out of the question. The role, presumably that of Lord Marshmoreton, was described as minor, but an RKO representative had informed the *Times* that "should a deal be made, the part will be expanded to one of importance," that Lauder had met with Berman three times, and had "virtually sworn his consent." The negotiations would eventually break down and the role of a potentially singing Lord Marshmoreton, the lover of roses more than once mistaken for the castle gardener and the kind and sympathetic father of Lady Alyce, was assigned to the non-singing but thoroughly excellent British actor Montague Love.

Before moving on to the topic of how Wodehouse's novel was gradually transformed into the September 25 screenplay, we should note one more late casting decision for another non-singing but significant role: Albert, the mischievous young page and perpetual nemesis to head butler Keggs. The "Pre-Budget Estimate" dated July 20, which lists most of the salaried actors who had signed contracts for the fifty-three-day shooting scheduled to start on September 22, indicates that the actor playing Albert was Mickey Rooney, then seventeen.[35] Over the previous two years Rooney had gained recognition as Puck in Max Reinhardt's highly acclaimed Hollywood Bowl production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and in the film of the play that followed.

The "Pre-Budget Estimate" does not disclose the fact that Rooney's casting in *Damsel* was dependent on whether MGM was willing to loan his services to RKO. On July 26 the *Times* described Rooney's role in *Damsel* "as the best comedy assignment of Mickey's career" and noted that the matter would be decided the following day.[36] Due to a chain of various casting issues related to the production of *Thoroughbreds Don't Cry*, the promised notice the following day reported that Metro had decided not to loan Rooney to RKO even though he "had been fitted for wardrobe and was studying his part."[37]

## NOVEL VS. SCREENPLAY

P. J. Wodehouse was an astonishingly productive novelist and short story writer, completing at least seventy-five of the former and about 300 of the latter.[38] Aficionados of the early American musical are familiar with Wodehouse's lyrics for the pioneering so-called Princess Musicals (1917–1918) and other non-Princess shows with librettos by Guy Bolton and music by Jerome Kern, who is the most likely suspect as the model for George Bevan, the musical theater composer hero of *A Damsel in Distress* (1919).[39] Wodehouse also collaborated with Bolton on two Broadway shows that did not require a lyricist. For *Oh, Kay!* (1926), the first of these collaborations, they teamed with the future songwriters of the film version of *Damsel in Distress*, George and Ira Gershwin. Their second collaboration on the libretto for *Anything Goes* (1934), complementing the lyrics and music of Cole Porter, ended up being almost completely revised by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse.[40]

Wodehouse scholar Roderick Easdale considers the "often overlooked" *A Damsel in Distress* "one of the best books Wodehouse wrote."[41] In discussing Wodehouse's timelessness more broadly, *Damsel* clearly fits this criterion: "It deals with universal themes such as love; reputation and social standing; manipulation and the difference between perspective and reality."[42] It also describes its characters with subtlety and nuance and with humor and humanity and is filled with memorable prose. Here are some examples of the latter taken out of context: "It was plain to George [Bevan] now that the sun and the wind were a couple of confidence tricksters working together as a team"; "He [Percy] was for a young man, extraordinarily obese. Already a second edition of his chin had been published"; and "He [Percy] could not have been called upon to meet a larger horde of relations than had surged round him that night if he had been a rabbit."[43]

While it is impossible and fortunately unnecessary to retain the elegant prose of a novel when adapting it to the stage or film, it is not an insurmountable obstacle to retain the basic plot for such adaptations. This is what happened when Ian Hay (John Hay Beith) and Wodehouse adapted Wodehouse's novel into a hit London play in 1928.[44] David A. Jasen reports that Hay would "spend the mornings discussing the characters and planning the show with Plum" (Wodehouse's nickname), while "in the afternoons Hay would work on the dialogue by himself" or, as Plum put it, his collaborator 'hogged all the writing.' "[45] The pageboy Albert was changed into a pagegirl Albertina, now the niece of the butler Keggs, and the cab scene and altercation with Lady Maud's brother Percy was moved to Bevan's theater, but for the most part the play retained the plot machinations and complexities of the novel, including all three romances (Lady Maud and George Bevan, Alice Faraday and Reggie Byng, and Billie Dore and Lord Marshmoreton). It also includes Maud's meeting in Act III with Geoffrey Raymond, the man she thinks she loves who turns out to be the well-known philanderer Austen Gray.

The main premises and central plot also remain unchanged from novel to film. Lady Maud Marshmoreton (Lady Alyce in the film) is a damsel in distress. Her distress is due to the fact that while on vacation in Wales the previous year she fell in love with Geoffrey (in the film Alyce met Geoffrey, an American, in Switzerland) and has since been held a virtual prisoner in the Belpher castle (Totleigh in the film), unable to see or communicate in any way with her beloved. Finally she gets her chance to secretly travel to London to find him. Meanwhile, the famous and successful Broadway and West End composer George Bevan (a dancing stage star in the film named Jerry Halliday played by Astaire) is looking for something more in life. In the novel Maud accidentally comes across her brother Percy who pursues her; in the film Alyce is pursued by the butler Keggs, with the page Albert closely following Keggs. To escape pursuit in both the novel and film, the distressed Maud/Alyce enters a cab occupied by George/Jerry and they fall in love at first sight, although not until the last twenty pages of the novel and toward the end of the film does Alyce realize this is what had happened. In the film this is the central romance, although not the only one.

The film replaces the eventual marriage between Reggie and Alice Faraday, the secretary to Reggie's uncle Lord Marshmoreton, with an unexpected marriage between George (Burns) and his secretary, Gracie. The film also removes the third romance that develops in the course of the novel, the courtship between Billie Dore, a young woman performing in George's new hit London show, and Lord Marshmoreton. Despite their twenty-six-year age difference, Billie and Lord Marshmoreton have much in common, especially a fondness for roses and nature. Billie is also disillusioned by the world of the theater and seeks the simple joys of country life Lord Marshmoreton enjoys. As a fringe benefit, her training as a stenographer makes her an ideal candidate to take over Miss Faraday's secretarial duties related to the preparation of the Marshmoreton family history. Billie plays an important role in the novel's plotting since it is Lord Marshmoreton's budding interest in her that is behind his decision to visit George in his lodgings near the castle. The ostensible reason for his visit is to convey his sister Lady Caroline's directive that a marriage between George and his daughter would be unsuitable. The real reason is that Lord Marshmoreton has lost Billie's address and wants to send her flowers.

With the deletion of Miss Faraday and the addition of Gracie Allen as the ditzy secretary for Jerry's publicist George Burns, the other major character newly added to the film, this summary has taken the comparison between the novel and the film beyond their common denominators. It is now necessary to mention other characters who didn't survive the transformation from novel to film and their replacements and how the decision to remove these characters guided various plot changes in the film. The removal of Miss Faraday paves the way for a possible romantic relationship between Reggie and Gracie, who, as we are often reminded when she says something totally ridiculous, was hired only because her father has invested in Jerry's show. Despite, or perhaps in appreciation of, Gracie's uncanny and comic ability to misunderstand and subvert the English language, George succumbs to her charms, which at the end of the film leaves Reggie bereft of a romantic partner.

Billie also plays a crucial role in the novel in serving as a witness to George's outstanding character and explaining to her clueless future husband that, rather than being an impoverished songwriter, George possesses great financial wealth. In the absence of Billie, in the film's Lord Marshmoreton accepts Jerry as a husband without fully realizing his financial status, because he likes him personally and realizes that his daughter is in love, even if she is as yet unaware of this. In the novel Lord Marshmoreton surprises everyone by announcing the engagement of his daughter and George at a dinner party, which gives Lady Caroline no choice but to accept the unwelcome news. In the film, the fact that Lady Maud and Jerry have been placed in a compromising position in the damsel's bedroom prompts Lord Marshmoreton and Lady Caroline to accept the inevitable in order to salvage the family's good name.

The removal of Percy from the film contributes significantly to the increased importance of Keggs, since it is now Keggs who follows Alyce into London, observes her escape into Jerry's cab, mildly assaults a policeman, and is carted off to jail.[46] The fact that the film opens with the selection of the sweepstakes by the servants rather than with the introduction of Lord Marshmoreton, Lady Caroline, Alice Faraday, Lady Maud, and Reggie Byng also gives Keggs greater prominence. This sweepstakes plot continues throughout the film, becoming a battle of wits between Keggs and Albert. The pageboy also plays a more prominent role in the film. For example, in the novel it is Maud who sends a note of thanks to George. In the film it is Albert, the holder of the potentially winning sweepstakes ticket labeled Mr. X, who writes the note that leads Jerry to Totleigh Castle to rescue his damsel in distress. In addition to his scenes with Albert and his scenes first against and later on behalf of Jerry, Keggs is also given a new plot twist as the butler who is secretly addicted to classical opera, an addiction that threatens his decorum when he can no longer control himself and rushes outside to sing an interpolated classic aria.

The character who suffers the most as a consequence of her transformation is Lady Alyce, the former Lady Maud. In the novel Maud fully confronts her feelings about what George means to her without prompting from her father and then confronts her misguided romance for Geoffrey. In contrast, in the film, as recently noted, it is Albert, not Alyce, who writes the note to Jerry, and, more generally, while Alyce possesses some understanding of her changing feelings, she comes across as a somewhat shallow counterpart to her character as portrayed in the novel. Lady Maud also demonstrates considerable cleverness and humor in eluding and one-upping her brother Percy, a character whose presence in the film is not otherwise missed.[47] Maud may not sing or dance, but then Alyce, as played by Fontaine, also completely eschews the former and only demonstrates a modest amount of the latter.

## The Making of the Screenplay

Between April 3 and July 16, 1937, P. J. Wolfson, Charley Chase, P. G. Wodehouse, and George Stevens separately prepared a variety of documents that gradually transformed Wodehouse's novel into the September 25 screenplay. This section will explore what we can learn from these drafts and outlines, in particular how George and Ira Gershwin's songs (completed in May) were placed in the film, and how the treatments prepare for the shooting that took place from July 22 to October 16. Space does not permit a detailed examination of the seven documents that eventually led to the "shooting script," all currently housed in the RKO Collection at UCLA. Instead, the focus will be on selected highlights of those steps along the way to the screenplay that especially prepared for the finished film released on November 24.[48] Particular attention will be placed on the role played by Wodehouse, as demonstrated in his "Analysis of Characters and Scenario of Story" of June 16 and his screenplay of June 25.

## Screen Play by P. J. Wolfson, First Draft Continuity, April 3, 1937 (169 pages)

Before the screenplay of September 25 (credited to Wodehouse, Ernest Pagano, and S. K. Lauren), the only complete extant screenplay of *A Damsel in Distress* is by P. J. Wolfson (the word "screenplay" is divided into two words on the title page). In a letter written more than two months later, Wodehouse mentions this screenplay without mentioning Wolfson by name:

> I am sweating away at a picture. It is for Fred Astaire, and is from my novel, *A Damsel in Distress.* When they bought it, they gave it to an ex-drugstore clerk to adapt, and he turned out a frightful script all about crooks—no resemblance to the novel. Then it struck them that it might be a good thing to stick to the story of the novel, so they chucked away the other script and called me in. I think it is going to make a good picture. But what uncongenial work picture-writing is. It makes one feel as if one were working with one's hands tied.[49]

Although he had not previously worked with Wodehouse, Wolfson did participate in the careers of Astaire and Rogers, first as a co-scriptwriter for Astaire's first film, *Dancing Lady* (MGM 1933), and then for Ginger's first film without Fred, *Vivacious Lady* (RKO 1938), seven months after *Damsel.* Wolfson also adapted the story that became *Shall We Dance.* Since Wolfson was indeed a pharmacist before he became a writer and then a writer-producer for various movie studios, it's reasonable to assume that Wolfson was the author of the scrapped *Damsel* screenplay that Wodehouse was referring to.[50] Wodehouse is correct in noting that Wolfson's screenplay strayed far from his novel, although in his own "Analysis of Characters and Scenario of Story," he refers to a moment in Wolfson's screenplay, a reference that provides further evidence Wolfson and the former druggist were one and the same.

## Suggested Treatment by Charles Chase, May 29, 1937 (5 pages)

This is the "Treatment" previously noted when discussing producer Pandro Berman's desire to cast Charles Chase as the principal comedian and song-and-dance man in *Damsel.* Also noted was the observation based on Chase's "Suggested Treatment" that weeks before it was announced in the *New York Times* on June 17 Chase must have known that George Burns would be cast as George Bevan's publicity agent and that

Gracie would be cast as a chorus girl in Bevan's show. Making Gracie a showgirl brings her character closer to the novel's Billie Dore, including her interest in roses and the man who adoringly attends them, Lord Marshmoreton. In Wodehouse's draft, Gracie will be working for the publicity agent George (Burns) with George Bevan as a client instead of at Bevan's theater. In this and several future drafts, Lady Maud also has a suitor other than Geoffrey Raymond. The name of this interim suitor, Percy Plummer, is a conflation of Maud's brother Percy and Edwin Plummer, who appears as a suitor in the novel, but like Lord Percy, not in the film.

Although Chase begins his "Treatment" by stating that it "tries to follow as closely as possible P. G. Woodhouse's novel" (*sic*) (1), it falls considerably short of this goal. Even the premise upon which Maud first meets George is altered. As in the novel, she does leave surreptitiously for London, but instead of sneaking off to meet the man she thinks she loves, she sneaks off with her father's secretary (a character named Alice Faraday in the novel, but unnamed in this treatment) to see Bevan's new musical, which she has already heard on the wireless. When she jumps into George's cab it is to escape her suitor, Percy Plummer, not her brother Percy as in the novel or the butler Keggs as in the film. Unfortunately, since Maud has also heard about Bevan's relationship with the ladies (falsely propagated by George, Bevan's publicity agent), she abruptly leaves the cab to escape his clutches. Only at the end of the film does Maud learn that it is Percy Plummer who "has been doing a little plain and fancy chasing around London" (5). Although he doesn't reveal how he will achieve this goal, Chase also mentions that he hopes to work in "the balcony Jumping Sequence" and the "Fun House routine." Surprisingly, although by the time Chase drafted this "Treatment" the Gershwins had completed all of their songs, the only reference to their work is a suggestion that the "Fun House routine" might include a song.

## Analysis of Characters and Scenario of Story, Prepared by P. G. Wodehouse, June 16 and 17, 1937 (21 pages)

Inspired by a meeting on June 15, over the next two days Wodehouse prepared what he called an "Analysis of Characters and Scenario of the Story," the second day falling on the day the *New York Times* reported the loan of Burns and Allen from Paramount.[51] Wodehouse starts by stating his goal "to get the Characters absolutely clear before starting to work on the story" (1):

1. George Bevan (Fred Astaire)
2. Hogey and Babe (Burns and Allen)
   A vaudeville couple without a love-interest. Hogey, who might even be Babe's brother is in any event strongly protective of her.
3. The Family at the Castle [Lord Marshmoreton; Lady Caroline, his sister; Percy, his son; Maud, his daughter; Reggie, Lady Caroline's stepson]

Reggie is in love with Babe, but Lady Caroline wants Reggie to marry Maud. Although Babe has a different occupation, she is clearly the counterpart of Alice Faraday. The residue of Reggie's romantic interest in Babe can be found in Reggie's infatuation with Gracie, Burns's secretary in the film. Before abandoning the idea, Wodehouse considers retaining the love interest between Lord Marshmoreton and Babe in a situation analogous with Marshmoreton and Billie Dore in the novel.[52]

4. Maud's Lover
   The situation with Maud's lover underwent a number of changes, including the idea of inviting him to the castle. On the last page Wodehouse concludes that it would be best to announce that the lover is now married, thus eliminating him from the story.[53]
5. Keggs and Albert
   "We are all straight about them" (3).

Now that the characters are clear (for now), over the next eighteen pages Wodehouse grappled with a wide range of plot points, ideas, and issues. We will note a few. First, it is important to emphasize that Wodehouse wanted the film to begin not with the family scene in the garden, but with Keggs's speech at the sweepstakes ceremony, and he remained unwavering in his desire to keep the sweepstakes part of the plot "alive" until the end.[54] After that, he suggests that they film the garden scene "exactly as in the novel" (5).[55] When the scene moves from the garden to the theater, viewers see Hogey and Babe rehearsing a song. After a cab scene that involves Keggs and Albert as well as Percy, George performs an unnamed (but already composed) musical number for people lining up in a queue waiting for tickets. Recognizable remnants of this scene will return in the Wodehouse screenplay discussed in the next section. After settling these matters, Wodehouse expresses his view that the scene at the castle should closely follow Act I of the play.[56]

Writing "out loud," Wodehouse then mentions "a problem which has just occurred to me as I write this," namely "how on earth" (11) Albert knows where and to whom to send the note to George and then how film viewers will know that Albert has written the note. Wodehouse's question, "Do you think we need to see him writing it?" will eventually be answered in the affirmative during the shooting.

Since Keggs has stealthily procured Reggie's sweepstakes ticket, he doesn't allow Albert's Mr. X (i.e., George) into the castle for the Thursday tour as in the final film. For the moment on George's side, Albert helps his Mr. X to hide in plain sight by joining the madrigal group.[57] Soon Percy recognizes George and gives chase until Albert escorts George to Maud's bedroom. As in the novel, George escapes from Maud's balcony by climbing up to the next story with the help of Albert's sheet. Unlike the film, in which Percy doesn't appear, in Wodehouse's draft George is escaping from Percy rather than Lady Caroline. The first day's "Analysis" and "Scenario" end with what Wodehouse calls the "Fun City Number," which will eventually become "Stiff Upper Lip."

Once he observes that Maud favors George (Mr. X), Keggs forces Albert to switch tickets. As part of Keggs's new campaign on behalf of George, he persuades Percy to invite George to the ball, allegedly to expose George as too gauche to be a serious romantic partner for a Lady. The plan backfires for Percy, since George's presence as a famous guest gives him unanticipated social status. It also provides an opportunity to dance to another unnamed Gershwin tune. Wodehouse then explains a situation that is both similar to and different from the eventual film. What's similar is that, thinking he is the man Maud met in Switzerland, various people have informed George to his surprise and delight that Maud loves him. What's different is that Hogey warns George he is more than likely the "plaything" of "dissolute aristocrats" (19).

Unfortunately, when Reggie introduces George as "the composer of these lovely melodies we have been hearing" (19) and asks George to sing and dance one of these unidentified numbers, success goes to George's head, which emboldens him to kiss Maud. Her response is to sock him one. Wodehouse continues: "Well, now we get the explanations which we have been dodging all this time. George sees his mistake and when he hears people coming—Aunt Caroline, probably,—he does Leonard's Leap out of the window" (20). After Wodehouse continues to ponder some of the things he has left out, he comes to the epiphany that the film can end with George hanging from the tree outside the balcony with Maud, "fetching a ladder and telling him she loves him—and the ladder falling and the two of them being left embracing on a limb of the tree" (21).

## "Original and Screen Play" (sic) by P. G. Wodehouse, First Draft Continuity—Incomplete, June 25, 1937 (46 pages)

This section will explore what was retained and what was altered when Wodehouse moved from theory to practice in his first (and presumably only) attempt to write the screenplay exclusively under his own name (as with Wolfson, Wodehouse divided the word "screenplay" into two on the title page and elsewhere).

On July 13, 1937, two days after the shockingly sudden death of George Gershwin on July 11 and about a week before shooting was scheduled to begin (July 22), Wodehouse wrote to his sister Leonora (whom he addressed as Snorky).[58] After discussing Gershwin's death and the "gruesome" way in which "everybody treated the thing so lightly," Wodehouse moves on "to something more cheerful," his work at RKO on the script of *A Damsel in Distress*.[59] He writes that he greatly likes and respects his boss, Pandro Berman, and likes working with "a chap named Pagano" (co-screenwriter Ernest Pagano; Wodehouse does not mention S. K. Lauren). Wodehouse then explains the compositional process: "The way we work is, we map out a sequence together, then I go home and write the dialogue, merely indicated business, and he takes what I have done and puts it into screen play shape. Thus relieving me of all that 'truck shot' 'wipe dissolve' stuff."[60]

In the next paragraph, after noting that shooting was due to start in "about a week," Wodehouse informs his sister, "we have actually completed about sixty pages out of probably a hundred and fifty, but this isn't as bad as it sounds, because we can write twenty pages while they are shooting two."[61] Wodehouse is probably referring to this forty-six-page incomplete draft dated June 25 based on his "Analysis of Characters and Scenario of Story" from June 16–17 discussed in this section. According to Wodehouse, he deserved credit for the dialogue and Pagano for the formatting (what Wodehouse calls its "screen play shape"). Until the unlikely event that the rest of the screenplay turns up (unlikely because Wodehouse almost certainly didn't go beyond p. 46), the source evidence contradicts Wodehouse's assertion. In fact, what survives is considerably less than the 150 projected pages of a complete screenplay (the final screenplay is 157 pages), even less than the 14 it would take to match Wodehouse's claim to have completed "about 60 pages."

On August 13, 1937, exactly one month after the July letter discussed and quoted in the previous two paragraphs, Wodehouse lets his daughter know he will be finishing his work at RKO the next day. Expecting to work about "a couple of weeks polishing the existing script," the unacceptable state of the screenplay (clearly the one by Wolfson) necessitated a ten-week commitment to create "a new picture from the bottom up, following the story of the book pretty closely."[62] Despite the inconvenience, Wodehouse is extremely pleased with the money he earned from the extended project, once again expresses his admiration for Berman, and exhibits high hopes that the picture will be "a big hit."[63]

Before it concludes with Albert writing the note allegedly from Lady Maud to Bevan/Halliday, Wodehouse's screenplay anticipates many of the plot machinations and locations that viewers will see in the finished film, albeit with some noteworthy differences. Although cut short early in the story (16 minutes into the final 100-minute film), the Wodehouse incomplete screenplay is a significant document and one that merits our attention. What follows is a synopsis of what happens in Wodehouse's incomplete screenplay and a brief discussion of what transpired between his screenplay and the final shooting script credited to Pagano and Lauren as well as Wodehouse.

- **Lawn at Side of Totleigh Castle (pp. 1–6)**: Lord Marshmoreton is swinging at golf balls. One ball smashes the window of Lady Caroline's (his sister's) bedroom, another ball shatters Maud's bedroom window, and a third hits Albert the page boy in an unspecified location (presumably his head). Keggs arrives after the first broken window with a telegram from Lord Marshmoreton's son Percy, who asks that a car be sent to London to pick him up. The film omits this entire scene and instead begins with the sweepstakes in accordance with Wodehouse's stated objective in his "Analysis" of June 16–17. It might be helpful to restate that when we meet her in London in the film Lady Maud will be renamed Lady Alyce and Percy will have vanished from the story, his duties as a character largely taken over by the butler Keggs.

- **Totleigh Castle—Servants Hall (pp. 6–13):** Albert has heard about the sweepstakes from listening through keyholes and tells Keggs he wants to use the 10 shillings Lord Marshmoreton gave him (to ensure Albert's silence after beaning him with a golf ball) to purchase a ticket. Since Keggs has already swindled the ticket with Christopher Plummer's name on it (the favorite to marry Lady Maud to be replaced by Reggie in the shooting script), Albert asks to draw Mr. X (i.e., anyone in the field not among those named in the sweepstakes). The clever Albert has also learned that Mr. X is likely to be "a young American feller she met in Switzerland" (not an Englishman she met in Wales, as in the novel). Albert also knows the Lady Maud is going to London that day to meet Mr. X while Lady Caroline and Percy are away. After observing Maud driving off, Keggs gets on his motor bicycle to follow her, and Albert jumps on to join him.[64]
- **A Street in London (p. 14):** A man in the street plays an unidentified tune on a banjo and passes around a hat. George Bevan (same name as in the novel) whom Wodehouse identifies in his screenplay as Astaire (Jerry Halliday in the film) wants to give him money but has nothing in his pockets.
- **Office Building (pp. 14–20):** Office of Filmer Yost—identified by Wodehouse as George Burns—is in his office smoking a cigar. Sitting opposite him is Billie Phipps, who is identified as Gracie Allen, Burns's secretary. Yost is dictating a letter to yet another supplicant writing to ask Bevan to dance for free. Bevan, whom we have noticed travels without cash, asks Yost for money to go to the zoo. The reason he doesn't carry any money is because he is such a "soft touch" that he asked the stingy Yost to manage his money for him. This scene differs in several respects from Wodehouse's "Analysis," in which Burns and Allen (Hogey and Babe in Wodehouse's "Analysis") are a vaudeville couple without a love-interest. In the film, instead of managing Halliday's money, they manage his publicity by turning him into a notorious lady's man.
- **Street (pp. 20–24):** Back on the street, a man identified as Seedy Man asks George for money, which he still doesn't have and Yost will not supply. To remedy this situation George asks Seedy Man to hold his hat then taps and sings "Nice Work If You Can Get It" joined by the banjo player and a fiddler, after which he gives Seedy Man the coins collected in the hat. "Nice Work," the only song identified by name in Wodehouse's screenplay, will be replaced in the film at this point by "I Can't Be Bothered Now."[65] The scene direction in the final screenplay conveys the origins of this scene: "A street entertainer made up to look like Jerry Halliday is holding forth for the entertainment of the crowd. His associate, a seedy looking individual in a straw hat and a swallow tail coat [Seedy Man], is seated nearby strumming a banjo."[66] The Seedy Man in Wodehouse's screenplay knows Bevan is the one dancing, but the street entertainer in the final film screenplay thinks Jerry is a "cheap imitation of Halliday." Jerry responds, "I want to dance. Can't be bothered," suggests that he is dancing to the tune of "I Can't Be Bothered," even if the title is not expressly given. It should be also noted that in the film, the song, Halliday's sudden

exit by jumping on a moving bus, and Keggs's arrest mark the end of the London scene. At this point in Wodehouse's screenplay, Bevan has yet to even enter his cab.

- **Fashionable London Hatter's, Piccadilly, and Taxi Cab (pp. 25–36):** Bevan hails a cab to take him to the zoo and Percy purchases a hat in a hatter's shop, after which we see Maud walking down the street. When the traffic stops, Maud and Bevan make eye contact. Maud then sees Percy on the street and enters Bevan's cab to escape him.[67] When Bevan describes the man heading in their direction as similar to that of a warthog, Maud responds, "Then it *was* Percy!" The scene continues with Percy's unsuccessful attempts to look into the cab and Bevan knocking Percy's hat off his head. Before Percy returns, Bevan and Maud have a moment to talk and Maud explains, without going into details, that she is "a real damsel in distress" (in the final film script it is *Halliday* who describes Alyce as a damsel in distress). At the end of this scene in the Wodehouse screenplay, Percy hits the policeman in the stomach and is marched off to the police station. In the final screenplay, Percy is absent and Keggs is the one who gets his hat knocked off, the one who hits the policeman, and the one who will spend a night in prison. In both the Wodehouse and film screenplays, Albert manages to briefly talk to Bevan/Halliday and obtain his name and address.
- **Totleigh Castle Garden and Library (pp. 37–45):** In the Totleigh Castle rose garden, Keggs informs Lord Marshmoreton and Lady Caroline that Percy has returned after a night in prison for assaulting a police constable. The scene then moves to the castle library, where Percy relates his London misadventure. After being summoned by Keggs, Lady Maud arrives and, when confronted, admits that she had been in London the day before to meet her Swiss lover whom she hadn't seen in a year. She also explains that she found the reunion disillusioning and that she "didn't like him anymore" and that the man in the cab was a stranger named George Bevan.

Wodehouse's screenplay differs from the final film screenplay here in several respects. By having Maud directly state that she had broken off with her American lover, Wodehouse denies the plot the opportunity to maintain the suspense of whether she will eventually change her mind. For this reason it is a significant change in the final script that Keggs discovered Alyce *before* she had a chance to see her American lover. Also worthy of note is that in Wodehouse's screenplay no one recognizes the name George Bevan, whereas in the film screenplay, Alyce's stepbrother Reggie (who is absent from Wodehouse's draft) recognizes Jerry Halliday immediately and is "dying to meet him," while Lady Caroline has read that Halliday is "the most notorious man in London" from whom "no woman is safe."[68]

- **Totleigh Castle—Small Attic Bedroom (p. 46):** On the final page of Wodehouse's incomplete screenplay we see Albert writing a letter (from Maud), then the contents of the letter on the screen, explaining that she is "in sore distress" and needs to see Bevan immediately. In a postscript Albert informs Bevan that "the Castle is open

> to visitors on Thursday afternoons on payment of a shilling." The conversation between Albert and Bevan in the cab and this final scene in the Albert's bedroom resolves Wodehouse's quandary about how Albert knows the name and address of Mr. X and how film viewers will learn that Albert is the one who wrote the note. Wodehouse's screenplay also reveals that it only took him about a week to answer the question of whether "we need to see him writing it." The answer is that in the final film viewers will see the tangible evidence of Albert's plot as he writes out a similarly-worded note: "Dear Mr. Halliday, I am in sore distress. I need you. Come to me. The castle is open on Thursday to visitors and if you come then no one will suspect your presence. I love you, Alyce M."[69]

## Story Outline by George Stevens, Incomplete, Part I, July 1, 1937 (15 pages) and Story Outline by George Stevens, July 16, 1937 (14 pages)

Although Wodehouse was still working on a screenplay for RKO during the first few weeks of shooting, no evidence survives after June 25 to reveal what this work entailed. Instead, one week after Wodehouse's incomplete "First Draft Continuity" (discussed in the last section), the director George Stevens prepared a "Story Outline" (July 1) followed by an almost identical copy two weeks later (July 16), both of which are incomplete. A complete and uncredited "Revised Story Outline," presumably also prepared by Stevens or at least prepared under his auspices, followed three days later on July 19.

In addition to resolving many, but by no means all, of the remaining plot details, Stevens's "story outlines" gradually reveal the placement of most of the songs along with some song titles.[70] In the July 1 Outline, Fred still sings a song along the sidewalk queue as he did in Wodehouse's "Scenario," but now it is identified, if imprecisely, as "I'm Dancing and I Can't Be Bothered Now."[71] The song he sings with the madrigal group, "The Jolly Tar and the Milk Maid," is properly positioned but not given a title, and there is no mention of the future "Put Me to the Test" with Burns, Allen, and Fred at their cottage near the castle. The July 1 "Outline" also indicates a "Fun House Number" to end the sequence at the amusement park.

## Revised Story Outline, July 19, 1937 (28 pages)

The first fourteen pages of the "Revised Story Outline" (July 19) are identical to pages 1–14 of the July 16 "Outline," but beginning about midway on page 14 through page 28, all the material in the July 19 "Outline" is newly added. Perhaps the most significant new plot development is the removal of Gracie as a love interest of Lord Marshmoreton. Instead it is Reggie who is interested in Gracie, and in contrast to the final film Gracie and Reggie end up with their arms around each other.

When it comes to the placement and title designations, the "Revised Story Outline," in the absence of Ginger, includes a song for Fred, Burns, and Allen originally labeled the "Whisk Broom Number," which will eventually become the dance for this trio without lyrics called "Put Me to the Test."[72] Newly added to the scenario is the song called "Foggy Day in London Town," lyrics that accompany a scene where Fred and Maud ride together through the Tunnel of Love.[73] When Fred, Burns, and Allen go down the slide into the Fun House, they are instructed to sing "Put Me to the Test," which raises some confusion as to whether the "Fun House Number" indicated in the July 1 draft was meant to be "Put Me to the Test." Another new song placement in the "Revised Story Outline" occurs after Maud apologizes to Fred for slapping him. The song suggested here, "Things Are Looking Up," will appear in a new but related context in the September screenplay.

Stevens introduces a new plot development when Geoffrey Raymond, Lady Maud's alleged beloved, arrives unannounced in Maud's bedroom. When Fred arrives, Maud sends *Geoffrey* to the balcony so that she can confront Fred with the rumors Albert conveyed to her about Fred's reputed cavalier relationship with the ladies. Geoffrey's presence leads to his joining the madrigal singers for an unidentified musical number. Later, Fred will return to Maud's room and manage to explain the misconceptions she had received from Albert. In Stevens's final outline, Lady Caroline interrupts Fred and Maud which forces Fred's escape by leaping from the balcony. While Fred remains stuck in the tree, Lord Marshmoreton shouts out "Stiff Upper Lip" and then begins to sing, after which Fred, Maud, and perhaps Reggie, Burns, Gracie, and Lady Caroline will join the song as Maud helps Fred out of the tree. Sometime during the shooting, "Stiff Upper Lip" was moved to the Fun House scene (replacing "Put Me to the Test") where, in the absence of Ginger, it will be sung by Gracie then danced by Gracie, Burns, and Fred.

## THE SONGS

Through the kind offices of a letter trail, it is possible to obtain a fairly reliable *Damsel* song chronology. On April 20, 1937, about three months after George and Ira began the score, George writes to his friend Mabel Schirmer that their "second Astaire opus must be finished in three weeks."[74] On May 12 he writes to his first biographer Isaac Goldberg that "Ira and I should be taking a vacation by this time, having just finished eight songs for the second Astaire picture *Damsel in Distress.*"[75] In another letter to Mabel on May 19, George confirms the completion of the *Damsel* score and again complains about the vacation delay: "Ira and I have had to literally drag ourselves to work the last few days as we have just finished the second Astaire score and have to start right in on the *Goldwyn Follies.* Even the Gershwins can't take that kind of routine."[76]

A slightly earlier letter to his cousin and business assistant Henry Botkin on May 17 offers additional confirmation that the Gershwins had by then completed their *Damsel* score, and adds a ninth song to the total he had given Goldberg a few days earlier.[77] Gershwin lists the titles of seven of these songs, and it is clear when he writes that "two are written in the old English style for atmosphere and score construction" that he is referring to "The Jolly Tar and the Milk Maid" and "Sing of Spring." Gershwin expresses delight that Berman "is simply crazy about 'Things Are Looking Up' and 'A Foggy Day'—and 'I Can't Be Bothered Now,' " and seems optimistic that another four songs "have distinct possibilities" to make their mark: "Nice Work If You Can Get It," "Put Me to the Test," "Pay Some Attention to Me," "and a little English comedy song called 'Stiff Upper Lip.' "[78]

Two of these songs originated before the Gershwins' work on *Damsel* began in January 1937. "Pay Some Attention to Me," which was dropped from the film, was a reworking of a song by that title originally conceived in 1928, and according to Edward Jablonski nine measures of "Nice Work" can be traced to the Gershwin song "There's No Stopping Me Now," drafted around 1930.[79]

Gershwin expressed his regret in the May 12 letter to Goldberg at the inadequate way his songs were presented in his previous film *Shall We Dance.*[80] Gershwin thought "this is mainly due to the structure of the story which does not include any other singers than Fred and Ginger and the amount of singing one can stand of these two is quite limited." At the time Gershwin wrote these words, it may have slipped his mind that Ginger was not going to be cast in *Damsel.* As stated earlier, Fontaine did not start rehearsing until more than a month after the Gershwins had completed their score, and she wasn't formally contracted until two weeks after George's death. Had he known that Fontaine would not be singing his songs, it probably would have made matters even worse, though knowing Gracie Allen would sing "Stiff Upper Lip" might have helped a little. As previously noted, the structure of most musical films (in contrast to a staged musical) does not generally give secondary characters the opportunity to sing. The Gershwins' solution to this inherent challenge was only partially realized by the addition of the madrigal singers at Totleigh Castle: "In our next picture *Damsel in Distress* we have protected ourselves in that we have a Madrigal group of singers and have written two English type ballads for background music so the audience will get a chance to hear some singing besides the crooning of the stars."[81]

The clever and comical "Jolly Tar" (1 minute, 50 seconds) is effectively integrated diegetically with Astaire, who is trying to hide his presence in the castle in the group but ends up calling attention to himself when he sings the wrong lines in the wrong places. In contrast, "Sing of Spring" is heard so briefly, 54 seconds, that its effect is virtually lost.[82] "I Can't Be Bothered Now" similarly clocks in at 75 seconds, but its song and dance is so packed with vim and vigor it's hard to feel cheated even if Astaire makes an unexpected exit.[83] Another four songs range between two and three minutes ("Put Me to the Test," "A Foggy Day," "Nice Work" [the vocal version], and the interpolated aria from Friedrich von Flotow's popular opera *Martha*, "Ah! Che a voi perdoni iddio" [composed in 1847]).[84]

Despite their relative brevity, these numbers are all remarkable in their own way. The "whisk broom" dance trio "Put Me to the Test" (Astaire, Burns, and Allen) exhibits a humorous use of this prop as the knights in shining armor take part by kicking the dancers on their backside. "A Foggy Day" shows off Astaire's elegance as a soloist and the cinematographer's attractive atmospherics. "Nice Work" is appealingly introduced by singers drawn from the madrigal ensemble "sung in a beguilingly unglamorous manner by a sour-faced female trio in Andrews Sisters–style close harmony," after which Astaire interrupts the second chorus with jazzy vocal riffs.[85] None of these numbers seems too short, and Keggs's aria is also the right length.

Although George and Ira were able to use the Wodehouse novel and the adapted play as a model, it is not easy to precisely determine which songs were meant to belong with which part of the story. Wolfson completed his screenplay more than a month before the Gershwins completed their score. After that it took several of the previously discussed drafts to reach completion before most of the songs were eventually placed as they would appear in the finished film. As previously noted, Wodehouse only flagged one song by name in his unfinished screenplay and even the Revised Story Outline of July 19, completed less than a week before shooting began, reflects significantly different positions of several songs and omits any reference to "Sing of Spring" or "Nice Work." Wodehouse didn't complete his work until August 15, and there is no source evidence linking him with the changes in the screenplay that took place during the first weeks of shooting (although he may have played some role). In any event, it's possible that "Stiff Upper Lip" didn't find its present position in the Fun House until shortly before rehearsals began on September 23.[86]

If some of the songs seem to have received short shrift in the film and others do not seem fully integrated into the whole, the songs themselves join those from *Shall We Dance* as among the most widely-acclaimed Gershwin songs composed between *Porgy and Bess* in 1935 and George's death in July 1937. Two of the songs, "A Foggy Day" and "Nice Work If You Can Get It," remain among the Gershwins' most popular and critically admired, and at least two others ("I Can't Be Bothered Now" and "Things Are Looking Up") have earned a firm place in the Great American Songbook.

The songs offer fine examples of the Gershwins' lyrical and musical language.[87] This section will focus on the latter, starting with George's predilection for repeated notes ("A Foggy Day" and "Stiff Upper Lip"), blue notes ("Foggy Day" and "Nice Work"), and pentatonic scales (again, "Nice Work").[88] Gershwin is also widely appreciated for his highly sophisticated and imaginative treatment of harmony, often for expressive textual purposes. Examples include the climax of "Foggy Day" where the tonic suddenly emerges triumphantly out of the fog in a burst of major mode on the word "suddenly" on the highest note of the song and the surprising French sixth chord that responds to the question, "Who can ask for anything more?" in "Nice Work." The majority of the late songs also demonstrate unusual departures from conventional 32-bar (A-A-B-A) song forms, for example "I Can't Be Bothered Now," which extends the second and fourth As to produce a 38-bar A-A-B-A chorus (8 + 10 + 8 + 12), and the 36-bar A-A-B-A chorus of "Things Are Looking Up" with its two 10-bar phrases followed by two 8-bar phrases.

A number of analysts have offered thoughtful and perceptive commentary concerning other special features in these songs. Steven Gilbert, who considers the increasingly sophisticated accompaniments as the major distinguishing feature between Gershwin's early and late songs, observes the use of inner-voice fourths in the verse of

"Things Are Looking Up" and the reordering of pitches and harmonies on the words of the title in the first A section.[89]

The use of the pentatonic scale as the melodic material for the statements of the title in the consequent phrase of the A sections in "Nice Work" is easy to detect, and it may not be a coincidence that the pentatonic scale is also prominent in "I Got Rhythm"—composed the same year, 1930, as the main tune of "Nice Work"—in which the A sections are composed mainly of ascending and descending pentatonic scales. But Gershwin's use of the pentatonic scale goes deeper, as Deena Rosenberg demonstrates persuasively in a musical illustration revealing that the melody notes of major downbeats in the A sections of "A Foggy Day" (C on "fog-," D on "Lon-," F on the first "Had," and G on the second "Had") are the same as the opening phrase of "I Got Rhythm."[90] Finally, it would be a dereliction of duty to overlook Allen Forte's elegant analysis in which he reveals how Big Ben's London chimes in the introduction to "Foggy Day" permeate the main chorus. This pioneering theorist also offers thoughtful insights on "Nice Work."[91]

## THE UNDERSCORING

In the natural order on both the musical stage and in the musical film, composers write the songs and arrangers orchestrate them. George Gershwin is often the exception. Although the Concerto in F (1925) is the first large work he orchestrated, he had already orchestrated three songs in his early musical *Primrose* (1924). After *Primrose*, Gershwin mostly left the orchestrations of his stage shows to arrangers such as Robert Russell Bennett who arranged *Lady, Be Good!* (1924), *Girl Crazy* (1930), *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), and *Pardon My English* (1933). But Gershwin would orchestrate his orchestral compositions and *Porgy and Bess* (1935) and "Walking the Dog" from *Shall We Dance.*

While the underscoring in *Damsel* as in most films was usually delayed until shooting had begun, we are particularly fortunate that Gershwin not only orchestrated most of the songs for *Damsel* before he died on July 11 (prior to the beginning of shooting on July 22), he also orchestrated the major dance number, "Put Me to the Test," and the first two instrumental choruses of "Stiff Upper Lip."[92] In fact, the only songs Gershwin did not orchestrate were "Things Are Looking Up" (Bennett) and "Nice Work If You Can Get It" (Bennett and George Bassman).

Bennett, who is credited as the principal (but only rarely the exclusive) arranger for about 300 stage musicals and many films, was responsible for most of the underscoring and most of the dance music for the "Fun House" Sequence. George Parrish provided the underscoring for the various "Foggy Day" passages and the two "Leonard Leaps," while George Bassman provided the jazz band arrangements for "Nice Work" and Ray Noble for "Things Are Looking Up." Table 11.1 provides a list of who did what.[93]

For his day job, Noble, who also played the role of Reggie, was perhaps the leading British bandleader and arranger of the 1930s. Although not known as a professional actor, prior to *Damsel* he had worked with Burns and Allen, not only as an arranger,

### Table 11.1 Songs and Underscoring in *A Damsel in Distress* (100 minutes)

Songs and Underscoring Timeline as They Appear in the Film

00:14 Main Title: “Things Are Looking Up”; “Nice Work If You Can Get It,” arr. Robert Russell Bennett

01:30 Underscoring: “The Bridegroom Pool” (“The Jolly Tar and the Maid,” “Nice Work If You Can Get It,” and “Chase”), arr. George Gershwin and Bennett

Underscoring: “Nice Work If You Can Get It” (final phrase)

06:44 Underscoring: “Foggy London Sequence” (“A Foggy Day”), arr. George Parrish

09:21 Underscoring: “Foggy Day Second Fog Sequence, Taxies and Bobbies” (“A Foggy Day”), arr. Parrish

11:03 Song Introduction: “I Can’t Be Bothered Now,” arr. Gershwin

11:50 **Song (Fred Astaire): “I Can’t Be Bothered Now,” arr. Gershwin**

Quotation: opening three notes of “Sweet Sue” (Reggie’s trumpet)

Underscoring: “Things Are Looking Up”

18:53 Song introduction: “The Jolly Tar and the Maid” (Reggie at the piano followed soon thereafter by a jazz orchestra arrangement conducted by Reggie)

24:50 **Song (madrigal ensemble), “The Jolly Tar and the Maid,” arr. Gershwin**

31:00 Underscoring: “The First Leap,” arr. Parrish

39:20 **Song [dance only] (Astaire, George Burns, Gracie Allen): “Put Me to the Test” [labeled “Whisk Broom Dance”), arr. Gershwin [quotation: “The Organ Grinder’s Swing”]**[a]

42:28 Underscoring: “Barker Spiel” (based on “Old German Band” [triple meter], composer unknown (Figure 11.1a), arr. Bennett

44:28 Underscoring: “The Tunnel of Love” (“Stiff Upper Lip” in scene with Allen and Noble; “Things Are Looking Up” in scene with Fontaine and Astaire), arr. Bennett

48:25 **Song (Allen): “Stiff Upper Lip” (verse and chorus), arr. Gershwin**

**(McGlinn, “Funhouse Dance Sequence,” instrumental only, 0:00–1:19)**[b]

49:30 Dance (Astaire, Burns, Allen): Fun House Dance, “Stiff Upper Lip,” vamp and two choruses, arr. Gershwin (McGlinn: 1:20–2:43)

51:00 Dance (Astaire, Burns, Allen): Fun House, “Turn Table I,” arr. Bennett and Hal Borne

[Calliope solo, “Old German Band” in duple meter (Figure 11.1b), arr. Borne; “Swiss Miss” (Figure 11.2) and “Oompah Trot,” arr. Bennett][c] (McGlinn: 2:44–3:39)

52:10 Dance (Allen): “Stiff Upper Lip,” “Turn Table II” (“Oompah Trot” and swing band variation of “Stiff Upper Lip”), arr. Bennett (McGlinn: 3:40–4:14)

52:41 Part I—Fun House (Allen), swing band call-and-response, arr. Bennett (McGlinn: 4:15–4:35)

53:01 Part II (“Stiff Upper Lip”) (Astaire) (march in 6/8 time, incomplete chorus), arr. Bennett (McGlinn: 4:36–6:01)

53:49 Dance: “Oompah Trot” (Allen still on the turn table), arr. Bennett

54:26 Dance (Astaire, Burns, Allen): “Mirror Dance” (“Stiff Upper Lip,” one chorus, swing band arrangement of the calliope tune), arr. Bennett (McGlinn: 6:02–7:10)

55:37 Dance continued: “Mirror Dance Cont’d” with “Swiss Miss” and countermelody on the xylophone, arr. Bennett (McGlinn: 7:11–7:28)

55:55 Dance continued: “Stiff Upper Lip,” shortened swing band chorus AAB Coda, arr. Bennett (end of Fun House dance at 56:40) (McGlinn: 7:29–8:22)

**Table 11.1 Continued**

56:45 Song fragment (Reginald Gardiner): "Ah che a voi perdoni" from *Martha* by Friedrich von Flotow (beginning)

57:48 Underscoring: "Alyce and Father" ("To Aldra"), based on "Sing of Spring," arr. Bennett

64:55 Underscoring: "Things Are Looking Up," arr. Bennett

65:30 **Song (Astaire), dance with Joan Fontaine: "Things Are Looking Up," arr. Bennett**

69:13 **Song (madrigal singers): "Sing of Spring," arr. Gershwin**

71:00 Underscoring: "Things Are Looking Up" ("sweet and hot version"), arr. Ray Noble [Reggie]

74:00 Underscoring: "A Foggy Day in London Town," arr. Gershwin

74:50 **Song (Astaire): "A Foggy Day," arr. Gershwin**

78:40 **Song (madrigal female trio): "Nice Work If You Can Get It," arr. Bennett**

81:05 Underscoring: "A Foggy Day," arr. Gershwin

84:01 Underscoring: "Reggie Proposes," "Stiff Upper Lip," arr. Bennett

86:02 **Song (Gardiner): "Ah che a voi perdoni iddio," from *Martha* (1859) by von Flotow, arr. by Bennett [sung by Mario Berini]**

93:46 Underscoring: "The Second Leap" arr. Bennett

95:56 **Dance (Astaire): "Nice Work If You Can Get It," arr. Bennett and George Bassman**

99:35 End music: "I Can't Be Bothered Now," "Nice Work If You Can Get It," "Wedding March" to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Felix Mendelssohn, "Things Are Looking Up"

Credits: "Nice Work If You Can Get It"

**Songs and Underscoring Listed by Arranger (major songs and dances in bold)**

*GERSHWIN*

"The Bridegroom Pool" (with Bennett)

**"I Can't Be Bothered Now"**

**"The Jolly Tar and the [Milk] Maid"**

**"Put Me to the Test" [labeled "Whisk Broom Dance"]**

**"Stiff Upper Lip"**

Fun House Dance, "Stiff Upper Lip"

**"Sing of Spring"**

"A Foggy Day in London Town"

**"A Foggy Day"**

"A Foggy Day"

*BENNETT*

Main Title

"The Bridegroom Pool" (with Gershwin)

"Barker Spiel"

"The Tunnel of Love"

Fun House, "Turn Table I" (with Hal Bourne)

(*continued*)

**Table 11.1 Continued**

Fun House, “Turn Table II”
Fun House, “Mirror Dance”
“Alyce and Father”
“Things Are Looking Up”
**“Things Are Looking Up”**
“Garden at Totleigh” [based on “Sing of Spring,” not used]
**“Nice Work If You Can Get It” (female trio and Astaire)**
“Reggie Proposes”
**Flotow: “Ah che a voi perdoni iddio”**
“The Second Leap”
**“Nice Work If You can Get It” (with George Bassman)**
*PARRISH*
“Foggy London Sequence”
“Foggy Day Second Fog Sequence, Taxies and Bobbies”
“The Dismissal” (based on “Foggy Day”]
“The First Leap” [Leonard’s Leap, same music for the second leap but unlabeled
*BASSMAN*
“Nice Work If You Can Get It” [dance] (with Bennett)
*NOBLE*
“Things Are Looking Up” (“sweet and hot version”)
*BORNE*
Fun House, “Calliope” solo

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[a] Music by Will Hudson, lyrics by Mitchell Parrish and Irving Mills, published by Mills in 1936 and recorded in 1936 by Jimmy Lunceford. The tune was inspired by the nursery rhyme “I Love Coffee, I Love Tea.” It is heard in “Put Me to the Test” when Gracie pantomimes the movement of a dancing monkey after Fred and George put some money in a slot.

[b] All the sections in “Stiff Upper Lip” and the “Fun House Dance” are keyed to the CD *Gershwin Overtures.* “Stiff Upper Lip” [Funhouse Dance Sequence], John McGlinn and The New Princess Theater Orchestra, John McGlinn, conductor, EMI D170391 (1987).

[c] The label “Swiss Miss” is based on the fact that is borrowed from the march and “Oompah Trot” that concludes this number from the Gershwins’ *Lady, Be Good!*, where it was originally performed by Fred and Adele Astaire and arranged by Bennett.

but also as a cast member of their radio show and some of their movies. In addition to playing a character, the soundtrack dubs the opening phrase coming from his trumpet of the popular 1920s hit by Victor Young, “Sweet Sue,” and a little later the soundtrack dubs some hot jazz licks also on his trumpet (which Lord Marshmoreton invariably calls a saxophone, both in the script and in the film). Later in the film, Noble (as Reggie) leads his dance band with a jazz swing rendition of “Things Are Looking Up,” which as noted

Noble arranged himself.[94] As a counterpart to the butler Keggs, who betrays his class by his secret addiction to opera, unlike his counterpart in the novel as well as Keggs, Reggie is a jazz fanatic, a passion that betrays *his* class. In the novel Reggie's passion is golf, a more appropriate pastime for a gentleman.

The musical material in most of the underscoring is derived from Gershwin's songs, for example the soft foreshadowing of "The Jolly Tar and the Milk Maid" and "Nice Work If You Can Get It" in the opening "Bridegroom Pool" scene. Stephen Banfield points out that in a film of about 100 minutes, viewers hear about 64 minutes of music, only about 24 of which devoted to the words and music of the central songs.[95] The rest is underscoring, which Banfield characterizes as "symphonies on Gershwin's tunes, generally focusing on one tune per scene."[96] The placement of these mini-symphonies means that the central songs sometimes appear in two or more portions of the film.

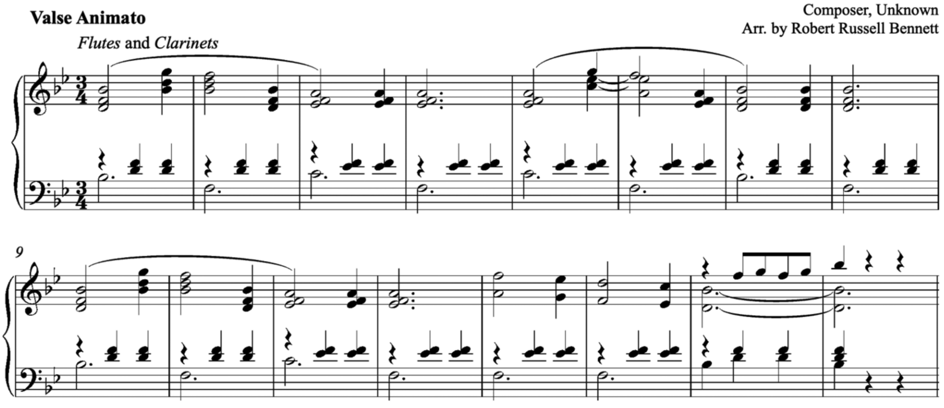
For example, the "Nice Work" underscoring is heard in "The Bridegroom Pool" in the film's first few minutes while the song itself is unheard for another 75 minutes. Likewise, the "Foggy London Sequences" underscored with some breaks from roughly 7 to 10 minutes into the film don't return until the 74-minute mark. Another interesting case is the underscoring for "The Tunnel of Love." When Gracie and Reggie are conversing in their boat we hear an anticipation of "Stiff Upper Lip," which will follow with words and music in about 4 minutes, while the music underscoring Alyce and Jerry's conversation (before she slaps him) is, ironically, "Things Are Looking Up," which won't be heard for about another 20 minutes.

After two choruses of a dance at the fair based on "Stiff Upper Lip," Bennett transforms the tune labeled "Old German Tune" in the score (a waltz in triple meter) that he introduced underneath the "Barker's Spiel" at the beginning fair scene. A solitary calliope plays the tune, now transformed into duple meter, the only arrangement signed by rehearsal pianist Hal Borne, who was probably the performer on the film soundtrack (see Figure 11.1).

Following the calliope solo, the dance continues with a new tune. I am labeling this tune "Swiss Miss," since it is the same instrumental tune that concludes the Fred and Adele Astaire duet "Swiss Miss" which precedes the Finale Ultimo of George and Ira Gershwin's (and the Astaire's) first hit Broadway show, *Lady, Be Good!* (1924) (see Figure 11.2). This labeling modifies the commentary by Mueller, who identified this tune "as an old German folk song his [Astaire's] father used to sing to him.[97] Mueller and others explain that the "oompah trot" was a shoulder-to-shoulder fast walking step around a stage (or turn table in the "Fun House Sequence"), to which Mueller adds that it was "invented by choreographer Edward Royce for Fred and Adele to close a number in a 1921 show."[98] Although he stops short of calling it either an "oompah" or a "trot," Astaire in *Steps in Time* describes an "old trade-mark runaround in a new Gershwin setup called 'Swiss Miss.' "[99]

In the final seconds of "Swiss Miss" from *Lady, Be Good!*, Bennett, who had orchestrated this earlier show, inserts this instrumental march-like tune followed by the "Oompah Trot." This sequence of march tune-oompah trot was recycled in the "Turn Table I" portion of the "Fun House Sequence" (51:00–52:10). Next up in this "Sequence"

a. Old German Band (triple meter)


Valse Animato
Composer, Unknown
Arr. by Robert Russell Bennett
Flutes and Clarinets
9

b. Old German Band (duple meter)

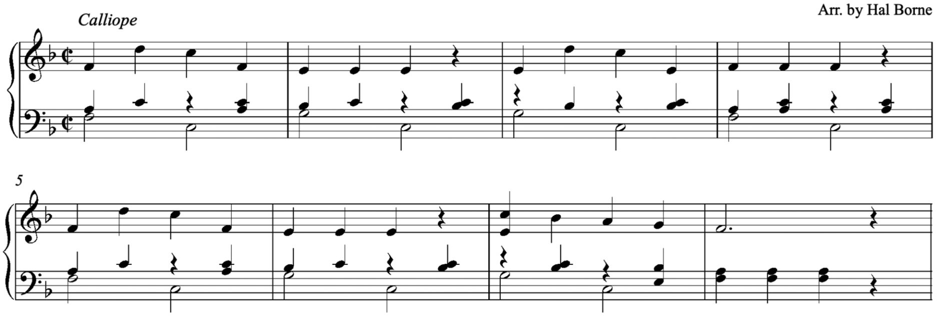

Arr. by Hal Borne
Calliope
5

FIGURE 11.1 "Fun House Sequence": (a) "Old German Band" in triple meter (16 mm.); (b) transformation of "Old German Band" from triple to duple meter and played on the calliope (8 mm.)

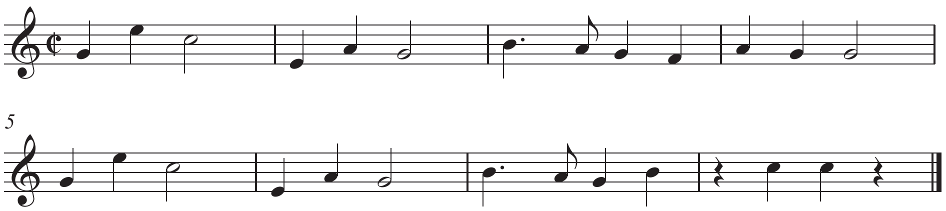


FIGURE 11.2 "Swiss Miss" tune from the "Fun House Sequence"

is a swing band call-and-response based on new material for about 20 seconds, after which Bennett transforms an incomplete chorus of "Stiff Upper Lip" into another march, this time in 6/8 time (53:01). After nearly thirty seconds of "Oompah Trot" (this corresponds to where Allen can't seem to get off the turntable), we hear the "Mirror Dance" (54:26), which consists of one instrumental chorus of "Stiff Upper Lip" and a swing band arrangement of the calliope tune. As the grand finale to this central dance in the film ("Mirror Dance Cont'd," starting at 55:37) Bennett combines a return statement in the saxophones of "Stiff Upper Lip" and the march from "Swiss Miss," accompanied by an active countermelody played by a xylophone with strings along for the ride. This was Bennett's moment to shine and he made the most of it. The dance concludes (55:55) with a shortened but jubilant swing band chorus (AAB instead of AABA) and a coda.[100]

Among the few examples of underscoring not derived from Gershwin's music is Parrish's underscoring for the suitably agitated "Leonard Leaps" in the minor mode (31:00 and 93:46). Parrish is also responsible for the previously mentioned "Foggy London Sequences," including the fugal passage heard early in the film when we first meet Astaire surrounded by adoring fans, a passage regularly singled out for praise.[101]

* * *

*A Damsel in Distress* is one of the most entertaining film musicals one could hope to see. Fred Astaire was in top form in all his dances, and his drum dance finale to the music of "Nice Work If You Can Get It" was a tour de force in his illustrious career. George Burns and Gracie Allen injected welcome new comedic blood as Astaire's new cronies, and in contrast to the usual comic suspects such as Eric Blore and Edward Everett Horton, they could dance creditably alongside the Master, and in the case of Gracie even sing a little. The Totleigh Castle cast of eccentrics, Reginald Gardiner (Keggs), Harry Watson (Albert), Montagu Love (Lord Marshmoreton), Constance Collier (Lady Caroline), and Ray Noble (Reggie), contribute considerable charm and whimsy to a well-constructed plot and frequently witty dialogue. The songs are among the Gershwins' finest, and to return to the laudatory words of John Mueller, "probably the best ever written for an Astaire film—and, therefore, for any movie musical."[102] With all this working in the film's favor, it may seem selfish to ask for anything more. Unfortunately, we do, and without Ginger Rogers—or a workable substitute—Fred's first break with his former damsel sadly and undeservedly continues to cause viewers undue distress.

## NOTES

1. John Mueller, *Astaire Dancing: The Musical Films* (New York: Wings Books, 1991), 10.
2. *Stage Door* (1937) [$81,000 profit]; *Vivacious Lady* (1938) [$75,000 profit] (Mueller, *Astaire Dancing*, 410).
3. *Carefree* lost $68,000 and *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* $50,000 (Mueller, *Astaire Dancing*, 410).
4. Shortly before teaming up with Rogers, Astaire had danced briefly with Joan Crawford in his film debut, *Dancing Lady*, which premiered on November 30, 1933 (*Flying Down to Rio* arrived on December 21). Unlike *Damsel*, *Dancing Lady* made a profit of $744,000 (*The Eddie Mannix Ledger*, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, Los Angeles).
5. The profits of the first seven films in ascending order are: *Shall We Dance* ($413,000); *Flying Down to Rio* ($480,000); *The Gay Divorcee* ($584,000); *Roberta* ($770,000); *Swing*

*Time* ($830,000); *Follow the Fleet* ($945,000); and *Top Hat* ($1,325,000) (Mueller, *Astaire Dancing*, 410).

6. RKO Production Files, UCLA, RKO Collection, Script Files, Box 527S. The reader's name was R. Oharra.
7. Mueller, *Astaire Dancing*, 10 and 127.
8. Mueller, *Astaire Dancing*, 127. In this indispensable discussion of *A Damsel in Distress* Mueller pays particular attention to what happens in each of the dances to these songs and how the dances are integrated into the plot (131–137).
9. Abel [Green], "*Damsel in Distress*," *Variety*, November 25, 1937, 16.
10. Abel [Green], "*Damsel in Distress*," 16.
11. John Kobal, *People Will Talk* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 626.
12. Kobal, *People Will Talk*, 626.
13. Marilyn Ann Moss, *Giant: George Stevens, a Life on Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 51.
14. Fred Astaire, *Steps in Time* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 229. For Joan Fontaine's recollections see Fontaine, *No Bed of Roses* (New York: Morrow, 1978), 89, and Kobal, *People Will Talk*, 433–434.
15. Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 245.
16. Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 245.
17. A few years later, Fontaine's career as an actress blossomed when she starred in two films directed by Alfred Hitchcock, *Rebecca* (1940) and *Suspicion* (1941). Fontaine was nominated as Best Actress for both of these films, ironically losing out to Ginger Rogers in *Kitty Foyle* in the former and winning in the latter.
18. Bob Thomas, *Astaire: The Man, The Dancer* (New York: St. Martin's 1984), 144; Peter J. Levinson. *Puttin' on the Ritz: Fred Astaire and the Fine Art of Panache, A Biography* (New York: St. Martin's, 2009), 104.
19. Fred Astaire, *Steps in Time*, 228.
20. Michael Feinstein, *The Gershwins and Me: A Personal History in Twelve Songs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 295. Feinstein places Matthews's unverifiable recollection in context when he comments that "Jessie was prone to fantastic inventions, so who knows if her casting was a real possibility."
21. "News of the Screen: Harriet Hoctor Cast with Fred Astaire in *Damsel in Distress*," *New York Times*, February 11, 1937, 19. The notice also mentions that George Stevens, who had directed *Swing Time*, and P. J. Wolfson, who had adapted *Shall We Dance* from a story, would be adapting the Wodehouse novel. A complete text of Wolfson's discarded screenplay dated April 3 is housed in the RKO Production Files, UCLA, RKO Collection, Script Files, Box 527S.
22. "News of the Screen," *New York Times*, April 5, 1937, 17.
23. "News of the Screen," *New York Times*, May 14, 1937, 22.
24. "News of Hollywood," *New York Times*, June 23, 1937, 29.
25. "News of Hollywood," *New York Times*, June 23, 1937, 29.
26. Although it is now known that from the outset that Rogers would not be appearing in this picture, the *New York Times* announcement expressed some uncertainty about what to do next: "After weeks of indecision and much pro and con debate among its top-flight executives over the question of a separation for Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, RKO finally has cast Joan Fontaine as the dancer's leading lady in *A Damsel in Distress*" ("Screen

News in Review," *New York Times*, July 25, 1937, 134). At the time she was hired as Astaire's new partner, Fontaine was an RKO contract player and therefore far less of an expense.

27. John Franceschina, *Hermes Pan: The Man Who Danced with Fred Astaire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 93.
28. Franceschina, *Hermes Pan*, 94.
29. Aside from Dunne, the major exceptions to the rule are the two songs in *Follow the Fleet* sung by the actress who plays Ginger's sister, Harriet Hilliard, best known as Ozzie's Harriet in *Ozzie and Harriet*, the long-running television situation comedy in the 1950s and 1960s. In *The Gay Divorcee* Edward Everett Horton barely sings the comic number "Let's K-nock K-neez," and the "trick-voiced comic" Candy Candido is featured along with Fred and the Wabash Indianians in "Let's Begin" in *Roberta*.
30. *New York Times*, June 17, 1937, 19.
31. Brian Anthony and Andy Edmonds, *Smile When the Raindrops Fall: The Story of Charley Chase* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1997), 166.
32. Ephraim Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 244.
33. Anthony and Edmonds, *Smile When the Raindrops Fall*, 166.
34. "Lauder May Take Role with Astaire: Scotch Comedian and RKO Discuss His Appearance in *Damsel in Distress*," *New York Times*, May 21, 1937, 19.
35. *A Damsel in Distress* Production Files, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, Los Angeles.
36. "News of the Screen," *New York Times*, July 26, 1937, 15.
37. "News of the Screen," *New York Times*, July 27, 1937, 24. Rooney's presence in *Damsel* did not mean that the role of Albert, whose presence was arguably more central to the plot of the film than it was in the novel, would be a singing role. Those who remember Rooney as the costar with Judy Garland in a series of musical films in the late 1930s and 1940s, including *Babes in Arms*, *Strike Up the Band*, *Girl Crazy*, and *Words and Music*, could easily overlook the first of their ten movies, *Thoroughbreds Don't Cry*, in which Rooney, for the only time in their ten films, did not share top billing and did not sing (the film features only one song, sung by Garland). Rooney's casting in *Thoroughbreds* not only launched a historic series of musical Garland-Rooney films, it also spared viewers from being subjected to Rooney's cockney dialogue, which his replacement, the sixteen-year-old American actor Harry Watson (the Sam in *Penrod and Sam*) negotiated with aplomb. It is possible to imagine that Rooney would have made a fine cockney, but his accent and overall racially caricatured performance as Audrey Hepburn's Japanese neighbor Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) has continued to haunt Rooney's reputation. See Hanna Flint, "15 of the Worst Accents Ever Heard in Movie History," August 22, 2018, https://www.yahoo.com/news/15-worst-accents-ever-heard-movie-history-135049091.html.
38. Wodehouse scholar Roderick Easdale states that Wodehouse completed seventy-five novels. Easdale, *The Novel Life of P. G. Wodehouse* (Newtown, Wales: Superscript, 2004), 193. Thomas Hischak's total is ninety-six; see Hischak, *The Oxford Companion to the American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 807.
39. George Gershwin thought the protagonist was based on him, but Kern seems more plausible. For starters, Gershwin didn't enjoy his first big hit, "Swanee," until the year *Damsel* was published, whereas Wodehouse and Kern had been longtime collaborators by 1917 and Kern had already produced a number of shows in London. In another connection between fiction and fact, Kern, like George Bevan, married an English woman (a fact Wodehouse knew).

40. Geoffrey Block, *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from "Show Boat" to Sondheim and Lloyd Webber* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997; 2nd ed., 2009), 42–43.
41. Easdale, *The Novel Life of P. J. Wodehouse*, 113.
42. Easdale, *The Novel Life of P. J. Wodehouse*, 190.
43. Pelham Grenville [P. G.] Wodehouse, *A Damsel in Distress* (New York: George H. Doran, 1919), 36, 42, and 153.
44. P. G. Wodehouse and Ian Hay, *A Damsel in Distress* (London: Samuel French, 1930).
45. David A. Jasen. *P. G. Wodehouse: Portrait of a Master* (New York: Continuum, 1981), 114.
46. Even to devoted Wodehouse followers, the mercenary Keggs is less familiar than the idle rich Bertie Wooster's loyal valet Jeeves, who appeared in thirty-five short stories mainly between 1915 and 1930 and eleven novels mainly published after 1934, a run that ended only with Wodehouse's final completed novel in 1974. Jeeves and Wooster have also been featured in films over the years as well as a popular television series. The main sources of Keggs's immortality are the novel and the film version of *A Damsel in Distress*. But five years before Jeeves made his entrance into literary legend, Keggs had already appeared in the employ of a household (other than the Belpher or Totleigh castles) in a short story published in 1910, "The Good Angel." Easdale's summary will sound familiar to either readers or film viewers of *A Damsel in Distress*: "Keggs gets involved in manipulating the love lives of the guests for his own ends to ensure he wins the servants' sweepstake as to whom the daughter of the house will marry" (Easdale, *The Novel Life of P. G. Wodehouse*, 143). Keggs also becomes an important character in *The Butler Did It* (1957). In the novel's first part Keggs is buttling one month before the stock market crash of 1929, but between then and the novel's second part set in 1955, Keggs is retired, rich, and still meddling in romantic affairs tied to a financial scheme from which he can profit.
47. According to Easdale, the phrase "one-up" is one of the 192 phrases or words coined by Wodehouse (Easdale, *The Novel Life of P. G. Wodehouse*, 191).
48. Production Files, UCLA, RKO Collection, Script Files, Box 527S.
49. Letter from Wodehouse to William Townend, June 24, 1937. Frances Donaldson, ed., *Yours, Plum: The Letters of P. G. Wodehouse* (New York: James H. Heineman, 1990), 131–32.
50. JPickle [evidently a pen name], "The J. J. Wolfson Story: Bodies Are Dust," December 3, 2016, http://www.wdors.com/the-p-j-wolfson-story-bodies-are-dust/.
51. Pp. 1–15 are dated June 16 and pp. 16–21 are dated June 17.
52. In Wodehouse's screenplay (see next section), Babe's name changes to Billie Phipp, the first name being the same as Billie Dore but playing a different kind of character, although both are dancers.
53. As we will learn in Wodehouse's screenplay (discussed in the next section), he later changed his mind on this point. In the screenplay Wodehouse informs us that Maud in fact met and broke off the relationship with her lover in London before she met George Bevan in his cab.
54. As is evident in the opening pages of his incomplete First Draft Continuity of June 25 (the screenplay discussed in the next section of this chapter), Wodehouse changed his mind a week later. The unfinished screenplay opens *prior* to the sweepstakes ceremony with Lord Marshmoreton hitting golf balls, several of which end up breaking the windows of his castle, after which the sweepstakes scene will follow.
55. This plan also changed in Wodehouse's June 25 draft (see next section).

56. On p. 12, Wodehouse refers to a part of Charley Chase's sequence in which George has his socks removed by a chiropodist, but the present author could not locate this suggestion in Chase's Suggested Treatment discussed earlier.
57. Curiously, Wodehouse mentions Wolfson's screenplay for the first and only time here, stating that they should "play the scene from Wolfson's script" (14).
58. Donaldson, *Yours, Plum*, 66–68.
59. Donaldson, *Yours, Plum*, 66.
60. Donaldson, *Yours, Plum*, 67. Readers may note that the working method reported to Leonora differs from his working methods with Ian Hay earlier described when discussing the adaptation of Wodehouse's novel to a play, in which Hay contributed most of the dialogue. With *Damsel*, Wodehouse mentions only Pagano and sources aren't clear about the specifics of Wodehouse's input or how S. K. Lauren contributed. In an interview with screenwriter Allan Scott published in 1986, the principal screenwriter for six Astaire and Rogers films from *Roberta* in 1935 to *Carefree* in 1938 claims that he served as an uncredited contributor to *A Damsel in Distress* as well. See Pat McGilligan, ed., "Allan Scott: A Nice Life," in *Backstory: Interviews with Screenwriters of Hollywood's Golden Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 311–333. In this interview Scott states that he agreed to serve as a collaborator for the first and only time at RKO as a favor to Pandro Berman, who was concerned about Wodehouse's lack of experience writing screenplays (321). If Scott is a credible witness on this point, Wodehouse may have made $60,000 but Scott did most of the writing (Pagano specialized in writing the gags) (321). Although neither Scott nor anyone else mentions the role George Burns may have played, it is well known that he wrote much of the material with Gracie Allen. In any event, it's not too difficult to imagine Burns coming up with this exchange:

    Phone rings and Gracie picks up phone and puts receiver to ear.
    GEORGE (quickly): I'm not in.
    GRACIE (quickly—to phone): He's not in.
    GEORGE: Find out who it is.
    GRACIE (to phone): Who? (to George) George, it's a Hawaiian.
    GEORGE: A Hawaiian?
    GRACIE: He must be, he says he's Brown from the morning sun.
    GEORGE: The man's name is Brown, he's on a newspaper, the Morning Sun—but tell him I'm not here.
    GRACIE (to phone): He's not here.
    George relaxes and sits back in his chair.
    GRACIE (cont'd): I tell you he's not here.—you don't, huh? (gets up and carries phone over to George's desk) Then you ask him yourself, if you don't believe me.
    (P. G. Wodehouse, Ernest Pagano, and S. K. Lauren, *A Damsel in Distress*, 12.)

61. Donaldson, *Yours, Plum*, 67.
62. Donaldson, *Yours, Plum*, 69.
63. Donaldson, *Yours, Plum*, 69.
64. In the film Keggs drives a station wagon and Albert follows by bicycle.
65. Making allowances for the fact that he named the "wrong" song, in Wodehouse's defense and strange as it might seem, it should be noted that he will be eventually vindicated since only one song will appear in the first 16 minutes of the film encompassed in Wodehouse's screenplay draft. This does not mean that music is absent from the soundtrack, in fact

quite the opposite. As the section on "Underscoring" later in this essay will show, with the extended "Foggy London Sequence" and other underscoring heard before "I Can't Be Bothered Now" arrives at 11:50 (see Table 11.1). Music, if not actual songs, figures prominently in the first 16 as well in the last 84 minutes of the film.

66. Wodehouse, Pagano, and Lauren, *A Damsel in Distress*, Screen Play (25). The dance imitator is Joe Niemeyer, who served as a stand-in for Astaire for decades, culminating in a second film moment as a serenader early in *The Belle of New York* (1952). Mueller, *Astaire Dancing*, 131.
67. Having made eye contact and seeing Bevan in the cab in Wodehouse's screenplay, Lady Maud's choice of cab was not a random one, as it will be in the film.
68. Wodehouse screenplay, 43–44. During the conversation Percy annoys Lord Marshmoreton with the expression "Tchah!" In the absence of Percy in the film, Marshmoreton's jazz-loving nephew Reggie persists in saying "Right-o." In each script Lord Marshmoreton impatiently asks Percy or Reggie to stop saying their overused word. In Wodehouse, no sooner has Percy been chastised for saying "Tchah" but Lady Caroline and Percy try Lord Totleigh's patience still further by repeating a new grating word, "quite," which by the end of the conversation Marshmoreton has also adopted.

    Lady Caroline: Quite.
    Percy: Quite. She's simply trying to trick us into relaxing our vigilance.
    Lady Caroline: Quite.
    Percy: Quite.

    Lord Marshmoreton: If you don't stop saying "Quite," I shall start breaking the furniture. Good God, boy—

    Lady Caroline: Harry, be quiet.
    Lord Marshmoreton: Oh, quite.

69. Wodehouse, Pagano, and Lauren, *A Damsel in Distress*, 46. Although film viewers see the contents of the note, the shooting script (D-10a on a page dated July 30, 1937) directs only that viewers see the name and address of the recipient. Two pages later, Gracie reads the note, which is also in the screenplay, to Jerry (38).
70. Although the first version of the story begins with the sweepstakes, Stevens writes that "Keggs wins Capt. Plummer, the favorite," not Reggie. Plummer also appears along with Keggs and Albert at the cab scene. Although Keggs threatens Fred, it is Plummer who assaults the policemen and is placed under arrest. The July 16 Outline is similar in most respects to the July 1 Outline, but Stevens does change the second sentence to read, "Keggs wins *Reggie* [italics mine], the favorite." As in the final film, Reggie and his earlier alias Plummer is removed from the cab scene, and it is Keggs who now assaults the policeman and is forced to spend a night in jail. It should also be noted that even though Gracie is now Burns's secretary rather the two of them in vaudeville, she remains to some extent a parallel character to the showgirl Billie Dore, who demonstrates a remarkable rapport with Lord Marshmoreton, as in the novel.
71. The correct name of the song is "I Can't Be Bothered Now." The addition of "I'm Dancing" is taken from the last line of the lyric. The reader may recall that in the Wodehouse screenplay the song was identified as "Nice Work If You Can Get It" and that this was the only reference to a song.
72. In the RKO Collection at UCLA the orchestral score for this dance is labeled "Whisk Broom Dance." Seven years after the sung portion of "Put Me to the Test" was scrapped

in *Damsel*, Ira Gershwin reworked the lyrics and Kern wrote a brand new melody for *Cover Girl* (1944). For a comparison of the lyrics between the two versions of this song, see Robert Kimball, ed., *The Complete Lyrics of Ira Gershwin* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 269–270 for the unused George Gershwin melody and 311 for the Kern melody. Burns explains how he purchased the idea for the whisk broom number from a vaudeville team dancing act named Evans and Evans. As Burns tells it, Evans and Evans then taught the dance to Burns and Allen who in turn taught the dance to Astaire. See George Burns, *Gracie: A Love Story* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1988), 205. It may be coincidental, but at one point in Wodehouse's novel Billie Dore relates the story of her surprise when Lord Marshmoreton came to see her at the stage door, "you could have knocked me over with a whisk broom" (Wodehouse, *A Damsel in Distress*, 237).

73. Note that Lady Maud's name has still not been changed to Lady Alyce while Stevens invariably refers to Fred, Burns, and Allen by their offscreen names.
74. Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson, eds., *The George Gershwin Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 259.
75. Edward Jablonski and Lawrence D. Stewart, *The Gershwin Years*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 276. Gershwin continues this sentence by adding that Samuel Goldwyn can't afford a delay in the production of the forthcoming *Goldwyn Follies* "while the Gershwins bask in the sunshine of Arrowhead Springs." Original 1937 recordings with Astaire ("I Can't Be Bothered Now," "A Foggy Day," and "Things Are Looking Up) and Astaire with the female vocal trio on "Nice Work If You Can Get It" are available on *Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers at RKO*, 2 CDs, Turner Classic Movies, RD 72957 1998; "The Jolly Tar" and "Sing of Spring" were recorded in 1976 by the Gregg Smith Singers on *Blue Monday (A Chamber Opera)*, LP Turnabout TV-S 34638; "Stiff Upper Lip," the complete Fun House dance sequence, and a suite from the film was recorded by John McGlinn and the New Princess Theater Orchestra, *Gershwin Overtures*, EMI D170391 (1987). For "Put Me to the Test" (along with all the other songs other than "Sing of Spring"), "transcribed and arranged for piano by Jack Gibbons from Gershwin's original material," see *The Authentic George Gershwin Vol. 4, The Hollywood Years*, ASV CD WHL 2110 (1997). For "Pay Some Attention to Me," see Lena Jansson and the Nils Lindberg Combo, *That Certain Feeling* (MP3 Music); a link to this recording can be found on https://gershwin100.wordpress.com/2018/04/24/pay-some-attention-to-me/.
76. Robert Kimball and Alfred Simon, *The Gershwins* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 218.
77. Wyatt and Johnson, *The George Gershwin Reader*, 261. Since Gershwin didn't identify the eight songs referred to in May 12 letter to Goldberg, it's not possible to determine the identity of the ninth song added in the May 17 letter to Botkin. In the course of the latter letter Gershwin informs his cousin that he is sending photostatic piano copies of all the songs and asks him to copyright them in his name and keep them away from prying eyes until the film is released.
78. Wyatt and Johnson, *The George Gershwin Reader*, 261.
79. Jablonski, *Gershwin* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 312. "There's No Stopping Me Now," George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress, Music Notebooks and Composition Exercises—Tune Book [1933–1937], 18–19.
80. Jablonski and Stewart, *The Gershwin Years*, 281.
81. Jablonski and Stewart, *The Gershwin Years*, 281.
82. The song can also be barely heard as underscoring during Lady Alyce's conversation with her father about love.

83. It was not unusual for Astaire to whet viewers' appetites by dancing a few seconds prior to a later song-and-dance number. Earlier examples include what Mueller referred to as "vengefully blasting out a raucous tap barrage" when Astaire exits a stuffy an eerily silent London club early in *Top Hat* and a few seconds of tap in front a shocked Russian ballet impresario played by Edward Everett Horton in the opening minutes of *Shall We Dance.* Mueller, *Astaire Dancing*, 79 and 119.
84. The only lengthy musical number is "Stiff Upper Lip," at the Fun House (8:12). "Things Are Looking Up" (3:46) and Astaire's final dance to the music of "Nice Work" (3:38) round out the score, the first of four major dances to feature the dancer playing the drums (see Todd Decker, *Music Makes Me: Fred Astaire and Jazz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 44–45). Interestingly, neither the scene where Lady Caroline chastises Keggs for singing the aria from *Martha* (56:45) nor the scene where he sneaks out of the house to sing the aria (86:02) appears in the September screenplay. It's a surprising sound gag, and based on the preview review sheets in the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, Los Angeles, 5.f.82, a majority of viewers were enthusiastic about this operatic interpolation. Perhaps even more surprising, most members of the preview audience were unaware that the opera star Mario Berini rather than the film actor Reginald Gardner was responsible for the music that came out of Keggs's mouth.
85. Mueller, *Astaire Dancing*, 136.
86. Franceschina, *Hermes Pan*, 94.
87. For insights into Ira's lyrics see Philip Furia, *Ira Gershwin: The Art of the Lyricist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 147–152, and Ira Gershwin, *Lyrics on Several Occasions* (New York: Viking, 1973), 13, 65–67, 90–92, 96–97, 156–158; 196–199, 293, and 344–346.
88. Repeated notes (two or three) can be found in every section of the "Foggy Day" chorus and in the verse and all parts of "Stiff Upper Lip," culminating with ten repeated notes in the final measures of the latter using four different chords during the two measures it takes to sound them all. In "They Can't Take That Away from Me" from *Shall We Dance* the first three phrases of the A sections offer five repeated notes each followed by a "three-peat" ("No, no! They"), each with its own harmony. In the last phrase of "Things Are Looking Up," all nine main melodic notes receive a rich chord of its own. Examples of blue notes in "Foggy Day" are heard on the word "day"(blue seventh) and "low" (blue third) in the first A section, and in "Nice Work" the blue seventh on the syllable "some-" (on the word "someone") in the release.
89. Steven Gilbert, "Nice Work: Thoughts and Observations on Gershwin's Last Songs," in *The Gershwin Style: New Looks at the Music of George Gershwin,* edited by Wayne Schneider (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 87–89.
90. Deena Rosenberg, *Fascinating Rhythm: The Collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin* (New York: Dutton, 1991), 361. In another contrasting pair of songs, the melody in the A section of "They All Laughed" from *Shall We Dance* is conspicuously built on a pentatonic scale, while the A section of "Love Is Here to Stay" (from *The Goldwyn Follies*) reserves its pentatonicism for the most prominent pitches. Interestingly, in this latter song, the prolonged notes of the pentatonic scale are also notes in the tonic triad, but they are rarely *harmonized* with a tonic triad (with the exception of the word "stay").
91. Allen Forte, *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era 1924-1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 166–171. In his analysis of "Nice Work" (171–176), Forte observes that, in addition to the sharp contrast between the ubiquitous stepwise

motion of the opening antecedent phrase ("Holding hands at midnight / 'Neath a starry sky") and the pentatonic consequent phrase ("Nice work if you can get it, / And you can get it if you try"), the phrases are also "linked by interval span and by motivic associations of the most elegant kind at the level of detail" (173).

92. The orchestral scores for the songs and the underscoring is housed in the RKO Collection at UCLA somewhat randomly but identified by arranger in three boxes of Music Files (Box 68, Box 69, and Box 1006).
93. One of the purposes of this section is to identify the arrangers of the songs, dances, and underscoring and in the process gently correct some misattributions or omissions in the literature. For example, even the usually precise Todd Decker does not credit Gershwin as a co-orchestrator when he states that with the exception of Bassman's arrangement of "Nice Work," *all* of the musical numbers were arranged by Bennett (Decker, *Music Makes Me*, 138). While it is true that George Parrish is usually uncredited in the literature, this was nothing new for Parrish, since out of the 302 films he is known to have worked on, 298 are uncredited. Perhaps for this reason he is not listed in George Ferencz's *Robert Russell Bennett: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1990), 184. Howard Pollack's useful overview of *Damsel* lists Bennett, Bassman, and Noble and omits Parrish, but adds Max Steiner and Roy Webb, whose names do not appear in the RKO Collection of orchestral scores. The RKO Collection does, however, corroborate Pollack's statement that Gershwin did not compose "any of the background music." Howard Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 678 and 681.
94. A holograph copy of Noble's jazzy arrangement of "Things Are Looking Up" (barely heard in the film) is housed in the RKO Production Files, UCLA, RKO Collection, Music Files, Box 69M. In addition to his work as an arranger, Noble composed four tunes that reached number-one hit status in the United States between 1933 and 1935. Noble's song "Cherokee," composed one year after the release of *Damsel*, with the complex chord changes of its B section (or release), became a major influence in the foundation of bop. In particular, Charlie Parker's early bop composition "Ko-Ko" (1945), not to be confused with Edward "Duke" Ellington's unrelated 1940 composition with the same title, is based on the chords of Noble's tune.
95. Stephen Banfield, "The English 'Other' in the American Musical: *A Damsel in Distress*," unpublished paper, 6, courtesy of the author.
96. Banfield, "The English 'Other,'" 6. In connection with "The Jolly Tar," Banfield (2) makes the case that, due to a number of striking musical connections, Gershwin was acquainted with John Ireland's "The Bells of San Marie," published in 1919.
97. Mueller, *Astaire Dancing*, 134.
98. Mueller, *Astaire Dancing*, 134.
99. Astaire, *Steps in Time*, 126. Pollack leaves out the adjective "oompah" when he states that "Swiss Miss" "afforded the Astaires an opportunity to stage one of their celebrated trots" (Pollack, *George Gershwin*, 410). Other writers describe what the Astaires were doing in the "oompah" trot and note that they used this routine in the "Swiss Miss" number from *Lady, Be Good!* and the "Fun House Sequence" in *Damsel*, but as far as I can determine, Nathan Platte, who is currently editing a critical edition of the film score to *Damsel* for the George and Ira Gershwin Critical Edition (Mainz and New York: Schott International/ European American Music), is the first to note in print that the march introduced during the "Turn Table I" section that begins at 51:00 uses the same music that Fred and Adele danced to at the end of "Swiss Miss." See Nathan Platte, "Writing for the Big Screen: *Shall*

*We Dance* and *A Damsel in Distress*" in *The Cambridge Companion to Gershwin*, ed. Anna Harwell Celenza (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 212. Fortunately, when *Lady Be, Good!* was imported to London in 1926, Fred and Adele recorded "Swiss Miss" (along with other songs from this historic show). The Swiss (or German) instrumental march that will return in the "Fun House Sequence" appears about 20 seconds from the end of the 2:47 recording. *"Fascinating Rhythm": Fred Astaire, Complete Recordings Volume 1, 1923–1930 with Adele Astaire*, Naxos Nostalgia 8.120501 (2000).

100. Table 11.1 offers an outline of the entire "Fun House Sequence" from Allen's vocal version of "Stiff Upper Lip" at 48:25 to the final chord more than 8 minutes later at 56:40 in the film.
101. Mueller, *Astaire Dancing*, 131; Pollack, *George Gershwin*, 681. Mueller writes: "The background music when Astaire is first seen riding through London is 'A Foggy Day' rendered as a fugue—clearly this is to be no ordinary movie musically." The passage can be heard starting a little after 7:50 min. and ending before 8:30 min. of Track 11, "An American in London," from *The Gershwins in Hollywood*, Hollywood Bowl Orchestra, John Mauceri, conductor, Philips 434 274-2 (1992).
102. Mueller, *Astaire Dancing*, 127.

## CHAPTER 12

# “THE PERFECT NANNY”

## *Casting in Disney’s* Mary Poppins *and the Children’s Musical*

MEGAN WOLLER

As her magical measuring tape declares, Mary Poppins is “practically perfect in every way.” In 1964, Walt Disney released the now iconic live-action musical *Mary Poppins*, starring Julie Andrews and Dick Van Dyke. After its massive popular and critical success, the film quickly became the standard for children’s musicals in the 1960s and beyond. This chapter looks at how the Disney Company adapted P. L. Travers’s children’s novels, considering the production history and the role of casting in the film’s legacy.

Scholars have long recognized the part that the character of Mary Poppins played in the development of Julie Andrews’s film musical stardom. The soaring success of the film, Andrews’s Academy Award win, and the subsequent enormous popularity of *The Sound of Music* (1965)—which also featured Julie Andrews as a singing nanny—cemented her star persona as the sweet, family-friendly musical actress. Disney’s *Mary Poppins*, however, not only launched the budding film star into fame but used her already growing career and well-honed talent in shaping the final film. By the time she appeared as the title character in *Poppins*, Andrews had originated the roles of Eliza Doolittle and Guenevere in Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe’s *My Fair Lady* (1956) and *Camelot* (1960), respectively, as well as the titular character in Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II’s televised musical *Cinderella* (1957). Andrews’s stage and television musical experience informs her performance of the strict yet surprisingly loving nanny. Indeed, Julie Andrews’s clear voice, straightforward characterization, and emerging stardom all do as much for *Mary Poppins* as the film did for her career. Therefore, this chapter analyzes the reciprocal nature of the relationship between Julie Andrews’s stardom and Disney’s *Mary Poppins*.

While critical discussion of Andrews’s performance frames much of the chapter, I also address two other noteworthy aspects of this film in relation to its place in film musical history. Related to the discussion of Andrews’s rising star power is the fact that *Mary*

*Poppins* featured another prominent stage, television, and film actor: Dick Van Dyke. In the middle of his successful run as Rob Petrie on the *Dick Van Dyke Show* during filming and release of *Mary Poppins*, Van Dyke had previously gained recognition for his portrayal of Albert Peterson on stage and screen in *Bye Bye Birdie* (1960 Broadway; 1963 film). Despite his widely criticized cockney accent, Dick Van Dyke infuses his *Poppins* character Bert with charm and demonstrates a considerable amount of chemistry with Andrews. Casting affects how Disney's film interprets the book series by author P. L. Travers. As such, this chapter considers how the characters, with a focus on Mary Poppins herself, change in the translation from page to screen. All these factors come together in the reception and influence of *Mary Poppins* as the gold standard for family-friendly film musicals.

## Disney and Adapting P. L. Travers

An examination of the film version of *Mary Poppins* must take into account two sets of creators: author P. L. Travers and the team at the Disney film studios. Like any adaptation that changes medium from literature to film, Disney's *Mary Poppins* alters the source material in myriad ways. As such, a brief exploration of Disney and Travers sets the stage for understanding the film and its place in the history of family-friendly musicals. By the early 1960s, Walt Disney was already a treasured figure in and beyond the United States. Having risen to fame with animated shorts featuring Mickey Mouse and other beloved characters, the move into feature-length film solidified Disney and his animation studios as a cultural force. Beginning with the highly successful and acclaimed *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), Disney's animation studios would quickly become the model for high-quality family entertainment.

At the time of *Mary Poppins*'s production, the Disney Company already held a prominent place in American, and indeed global, popular culture. Both Walt Disney as a public and creative figure as well as the seemingly endlessly growing company he began inspire a rich source of investigation. In recent decades, a number of monographs interrogate Disney and the company's vast influence on popular culture. As several scholars have noted, the role of Disney as moral educator through the production of an image of childhood innocence and values has been immense.[1] Indeed, Disney films often take an explicit educational stance, encouraging reading, good behavior, and the importance of doing one's chores. While later scholarship often focuses on the so-called Renaissance era, the notion that Disney was a leader in children's entertainment with a penchant toward conservative family values is an important consideration for the entirety of the company's output. The importance of education, nuclear family units, and good behavior all come into play in Disney films.

Another consideration for the understanding the development of *Mary Poppins* is the move from animated feature film to live-action. The 1950 film *Treasure Island* began a period of live-action productions for theatrical release, and over thirty live-action films had been released by Walt Disney Pictures by the time *Mary Poppins* began filming. With films such as *Old Yeller* (1957) and *The Parent Trap* (1961), Disney Productions cultivated a different type of entertainment from the animated fairy-tale classics for which they had become famous. As a whole, these films maintain the broad goal of promoting "good, old-fashioned family values." They also help to set the stage for the live-action/animation hybrid that would be the stylistic hallmark of *Mary Poppins*. With experience in both of types of film, the Disney Company was poised to create an innovative adaptation of Travers's books.

Travers created Mary Poppins in her series on the mysterious nanny and the Banks family. By the time Walt Disney had acquired the rights, Travers had written four installments of the series: *Mary Poppins* (1934), *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935), *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* (1943), and *Mary Poppins in the Park* (1952). Each of these books presents a series of vignettes—often magical adventures—featuring Poppins and the Banks children. Although understood by readers as children's books, Travers herself always claimed that she did not write for children. Travers often protested the label, and in one memorable talk stated, "Indeed I don't think there are such things. There are simply books and some of them children read. I don't think there is any such thing as a children's book. . . . I dislike the distinction very much."[2] Despite Travers's protestations, the appeal of the stories for children certainly played a role in Disney's pursuing the property rights with such gusto. Walt Disney also understood that for a film to be successful, it must attract a wider demographic. The kind of family-friendly novel that Mary Poppins represents offers the right kind of charm.

From the outset, Travers and Disney had a contentious working relationship. Disney had been attempting to acquire the rights to Mary Poppins for nearly twenty years before Travers finally relented. Afterward, the role Travers played in the creation of the film was relatively minimal, though she tried to insert herself as much as possible. While Travers outlined the initial treatment of her stories for the screenplay, the filmmakers used very little of her draft. She envisioned more than fifteen of the stories from across three of her books used in the film. Travers's books, however, are episodic with very little narrative through-line to connect the books as either stand-alones or a series. Mary Poppins flies into the lives of the Banks, takes the children on magical adventures (which she denies), sternly raises them, and flies right out again at the end. These vignettes offer promising adventures, but the Disney creative team knew a full-length family film needed plot.

As such, the Disney film ultimately loosely adapts Travers's books. For starters, only three episodes from the first book are fully adapted, "East Wind," "The Day Out," and "Laughing Gas"; the last example is the story in which the children take tea on the ceiling with Mary Poppins's eccentric relative (Figure 12.1). These stories underwent alterations in order to fit the new streamlined narrative, and the screenwriters also incorporated elements from additional stories in the second and third books. A number of details, including Mary Poppins's remarkable carpet bag, delicious personalized medicine, and parrot head umbrella, all derive from the source books. The film, however, removes three of the younger Banks children so that only Jane and Michael remain.

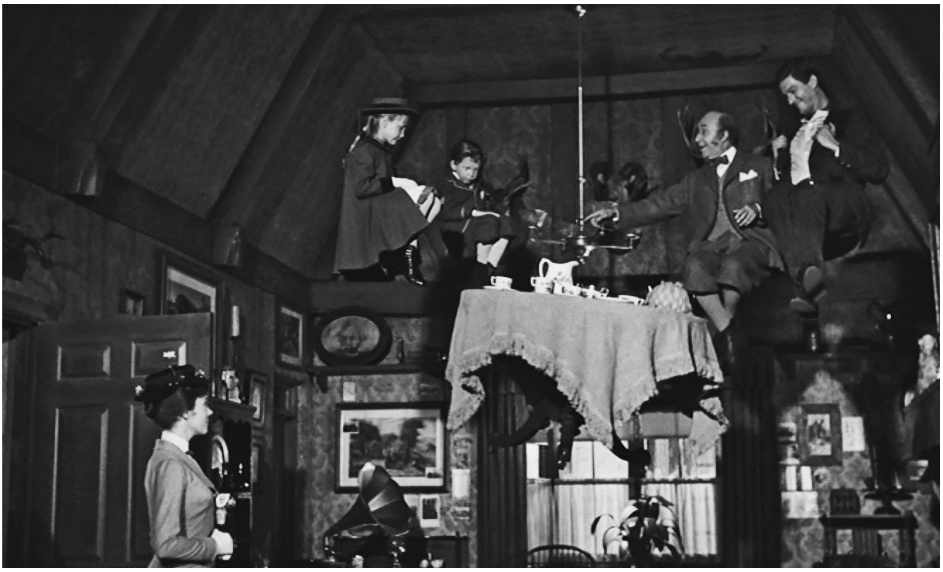


**FIGURE 12.1** Uncle Albert's Tea Party on the Ceiling from *Mary Poppins* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1964).

Much to Travers's chagrin, the screenwriters also increased the family drama. Mr. Banks and his career at the bank represent a much larger conflict than ever presented in the book series. Biographer Valerie Lawson claims that Mary Poppins always came to the Banks family "to find something for herself. Once she found it, she was free to leave."[3] While the family thrives under her care, they do not need Mary Poppins to fix them. In Disney's film, Mary Poppins expressly arrives in order to repair a broken family and can only leave once she restores the nuclear family to a happy, loving home. The resulting film uses Travers's stories as a significant source of inspiration rather than a text to be faithfully rendered. While this adaptive approach irked Travers, the final film has been cherished by generations of filmgoers and introduced many to Travers's own works.

Perhaps the largest contributions made by the Disney team involve the musicalization and characterization within the 1964 film—each of which is tied to one another. Robert B. and Richard M. Sherman wrote the songs from *Mary Poppins*, including the well-known tunes "A Spoonful of Sugar," "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious," and "Chim Chim Cher-ee." Although *Mary Poppins* would cement the Sherman brothers' place in the Disney empire, the two had previously worked on various live-action and animated television shows and films for the company. Initially, the Shermans wrote standalone songs for these projects, including "Let's Get Together" as well as the title song for *The Parent Trap* (1961), and "Enjoy It," written for Maurice Chevalier in *In Search of the Castaways* (1962). It was not until the 1963 animated feature *The Sword in the Stone* that the Sherman brothers would write a number of plot songs for a film. The songwriting team considered their work on *The Sword in the Stone* as a lesson in writing for character and plot, which would only come to fruition in *Mary Poppins*. Although dissatisfied with *The Sword and the Stone* as a final product, Robert Sherman later discussed how they learned about integrating song with plot, stating that "with animated films the songs seem so much more important to the entire story line of the film. . . . That's something you don't get to do when just writing popular songs."[4] At the same time, he lamented the relative lack of integration, in part due to the fact that they did not have the degree of control in how their songs might be woven into the orchestral score.[5] The team would take all of the lessons they learned—both good and bad—and apply them to *Mary Poppins*.

The brothers' songs were already becoming the sound of Disney in the 1960s. James Bohn comments that the "Sherman brothers' collaboration bore rich fruit, yielding over two hundred songs, many of which are both memorable and popular."[6] As indicated earlier, these songs appeared on television, in theme parks (including "It's a Small World"), and in both live-action and animated films. In a 1966 radio interview, Walt Disney called the Sherman brothers "a very important part of our organization here. They're wonderful. Well, they go for the 'team play,' you know. That's the way we work here. It's the team that gets together and builds these things. The Sherman Brothers are not only very talented, but very cooperative."[7] Of course, the songwriting team earned a substantial amount of critical and popular success with their contributions to *Mary Poppins*.

The songs for *Mary Poppins* not only work well in their own right with catchy tunes and memorable lyrics, but they help to delineate character and tell the story. In his insightful analysis of the Sherman brothers' *Poppins* songs, Raymond Knapp calls the score their "crowning achievement," both for the well-crafted songs and for the level of integration the duo accomplishes.[8] He asserts that it is "sometimes difficult to tell whether the story seems as effective and affecting as it does because of the songs, or whether the evident craft behind the songs and their deployment is a response to a particularly congenial set of situation and characters."[9] In short, *Mary Poppins* follows in the path of the integrated musical.[10] The overall score, composed by Irwin Kostal, also heavily employs the Sherman brothers' songs. Throughout the film, instrumental snippets of "Spoonful of Sugar," "Feed the Birds," "Chim Chim Cher-ee," and "The Life I Lead" accompany particular situations. As such, the songwriters had a lot to do with how the various characters were represented differently from Travers's stories.

Many of the changes are wrought in the adult characters through their songs, especially for the parents of the Banks children. Mrs. Banks becomes a suffragette—an apt addition given that the film changes the time period from the 1930s to the Edwardian era (specifically 1910). She sings the rousing yet somewhat politically superficial "Sister Suffragette." Mr. Banks, on the other hand, turns into an extremely strict, career-obsessed patriarch, as evidenced in "The Life I Lead."[11] In a nutshell, the adult Bankses' songs highlight their status as absent parents: their songs set up the family problem before the Banks children even appear onscreen, and the audience witnesses the preoccupations of their parents. This represents a marked change from Travers's books in which the family's need for a nanny is depicted as standard for a certain class of British citizen. The parents, though mildly clueless and vaguely struggling through life, are loving and attentive. Travers, in particular, disliked what she perceived to be the cold nature of Mr. Banks in the Disney version.[12] For the Disney ethos, however, the preoccupation of the Banks parents not only explains the need for a nanny but offers a familial conflict for the magical Mary Poppins to resolve.

The most significant alteration of a character is, of course, Mary Poppins herself. As a number of commentators have noted, the change from Travers's nanny to Disney's is a remarkable one. In Travers's books, Mary Poppins might best be described as enigmatic. Although Travers gives the readers glimpses of a personal life in stories such as "The Day Out," in which the nanny has a weekly tea outing with Bert on her days off, neither the reader nor the Bankses know where Mary Poppins comes from or where she goes when not dropping in on the Banks family. Lawson describes the book version as someone who "hides her compassion. Almost sadistic at times, Mary is never really nasty but often very sharp."[13] She brooks no argument from her charges and not only denies the magical adventures she takes the children on but very often vocally decries their questions and excitement as idiotic. At the same time, Patricia Demers claims that "the bond between her and the children is cemented as much by her brusqueness, as by her firm yet sympathetic adult presence. Neither bored by her charges, nor infantilized by their demands, Mary Poppins is clearly at home in the nursery."[14] While Mary Poppins is a fascinating and incredibly complex literary figure, she is also not particularly likable—a difficulty when translating her to the screen, especially with the Disney brand attached.

In adapting Travers's nanny, Disney alters the character in order to further the company's typical moral agenda. In her analysis of the Disney Company's approach to the reinvention of folk and fairy tales, Janet Wasko asserts that the stories undergo a "process of Disneyfication, which involves sanitization and Americanization."[15] Indeed, this process can be seen in *Mary Poppins* in a number of ways. The reinforcement of the nuclear family and typical values represents one important change that can be viewed in the light of Disneyfication. The Disney film makes a concerted effort to moralize. While the books emphasize good behavior and lessons learned by the Banks children, the Disney version invents a fractured family so that it might be explicitly repaired. Anne McLeer places this narrative move within the context of the 1960s and the burgeoning second-wave feminist movement. She states that "the text contrasts the errant mother, who cares more for feminism than for her mother-role, and 'practically perfect' Mary Poppins who brings the ideal balance of nurturance and discipline into the children's lives."[16] As McLeer, along with Chris Cuomo and Tim Stephenson, have noted, Mary Poppins harnesses her status as an independent woman to reassert the patriarchy, representing a complicated relationship with feminist ideals.[17] In her nanny role, Mary Poppins provides a model of motherhood and parental excellence in general from which Jane and Michael's parents can learn. The importance of family over career (or social movements via the suffrage connection) and a child's need for parental involvement move to the forefront of the film's messaging.

Similarly, the 1964 film might be viewed as a simplification or even a watered-down version of Travers's character. The Mary Poppins of the film is much less salty than her literary counterpart. This alteration can certainly be viewed in the light of "sanitization."

Mary Poppins becomes a less mystifying personality. While an element of mystery remains, the film removes her sheer impenetrability. Enthusiasts of Travers's work tend to lament the sanitized version of Mary Poppins. Unsurprisingly, biographers Demers and Lawson both denigrate the film in favor of the novels. Demers refers to the film as "trivializing" a number of times throughout her discussion and has particular issues with the animated sequence.[18] Knapp sums up the opposing views of the film nicely, observing that for some the transformation of the character might be "unforgivable," "yet, from the opposite perspective, these 'flaws'—particularly the transformation of its central character—are the film's great strengths, for they allow it to connect widely and deeply with its American audience."[19] Comparatively, the film's version of the character might be viewed as saccharine, lacking the acerbic nature of Travers's nanny. Changes made in the screenplay and through the addition of songs certainly play a large role here. At the same time, casting, especially through the developing star persona of Julie Andrews, affects the audience's experience of Mary Poppins as both character and film.

## Julie Andrews, Stardom, and the Shaping of Poppins's Characterization

At the time of the film's making, Julie Andrews was known mostly for her stage roles and had yet to make her way in Hollywood. Andrews began her career on the stage in England as a child, able to sing with a mature, clear tone and produce high notes. In 1954, she made her Broadway debut as Polly Browne in *The Boy Friend*. But it was Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe who would make her a star. She originated the role of Eliza Doolittle in the highly successful *My Fair Lady* (1956) on stage. In a documentary and memoir, Andrews later tells a story about her audition for Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Pipe Dream*. She admits that Richard Rodgers generously advised her to take the Lerner and Loewe opportunity if offered but to let them know if she was free so that they could use her.[20] She also originated Guenevere in the Broadway production of *Camelot* (1960). These two musicals and their accompanying cast albums made the young Julie Andrews a Broadway star. In 1956, Andrews starred alongside Bing Crosby in the television musical adaptation *High Tor*, appearing on American television for the first time. Although she chose *My Fair Lady* over *Pipe Dream*, Andrews had another opportunity to sing a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical before filming *Mary Poppins*. The team wrote the television musical *Cinderella* (1957) for Andrews, and 107 million viewers tuned in to its broadcast. And in 1961, Andrews and Richard Burton's performances on the *Ed Sullivan Show* famously helped to increase ticket sales for *Camelot*. Cumulatively, these televised appearances turned the Broadway darling into a household name.

While she had begun her illustrious career with great acclaim, Andrews had yet to be tested on the silver screen. Producers infamously rejected Andrews to play Eliza

Doolittle in the Warner Bros. film version of *My Fair Lady* (1964) in favor of Hollywood star Audrey Hepburn—despite the fact that Hepburn was not a strong singer and was eventually dubbed by Marni Nixon. When a colleague suggested the singing actress for the title role in *Poppins*, Walt Disney attended a performance of *Camelot* and offered Andrews the role of Mary Poppins on the spot.[21] She had never read Travers's books, instead bringing her own interpretation to the role. *Mary Poppins* not only did well at the box office, but Andrews won the Academy Award for her performance as the magical nanny. And it was this film, along with *The Sound of Music*, that would shape Andrews's star persona—a persona that holds so much sway, it continues to the present, despite a long career.

In the popular and scholarly discourse surrounding Andrews, many of the same ideas or keywords consistently appear: sweet, elegant, wholesome, and strong. Andrews herself has noted that this image began in the 1950s and claims it actually affected the love triangle in *Camelot.* In her memoir, she states that "during the five weeks that we rehearsed, it became obvious that Richard (Arthur) was so damned attractive that Julie (Guenevere) was going to be roundly despised by all if she transgressed. This was not helped by my virginal, squeaky-clean image."[22] This virtuous persona intersects with and was reinforced by Andrews's nanny/governess roles, conflating her star image with her most famous characters. In *A Problem Like Maria*, Stacy Wolf gives an extended analysis of Andrews's persona and performances, both in a mainstream context and re-evaluating them to explore meaning from a queer perspective. Wolf notes that

> with her perfect posture and perfect diction, her bright blue eyes and well-defined features, and her British accent just strong enough to suggest royalty to an American audience, Andrews exuded a kind of not-yet-a-star quality even after she was a huge star.[23]

Andrews charmed audiences, both onscreen and off, with her perceived elegance, graciousness, and sweet humility. Wolf also discusses how the actress and her voice are inextricably linked. Wolf posits that "descriptions of Andrews's voice produce associations with her personality; because her voice sounds sweet, she seems to be good, innocent, and properly feminine."[24] Similarly, Peter Kemp proposes that Andrews has a "perfectly pitched, superbly articulated vocal instrument ideal for the lyric-dependent songs of stage and movie musicals."[25] Known for vocal clarity and a wide range, Andrews's voice quickly became easily recognizable. Associations stemming from vocal quality dovetail with the persona developed from Andrews's nanny roles. Thus, her voice reinforces the image constructed through *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music*.

For many viewers throughout the decades, Julie Andrews *is* Mary Poppins. As such, her persona and vocal quality define the film's version of the character. As discussed, Andrews was already developing a persona predicated on a sense of decency and goodness. While the Mary Poppins of the books teaches the children to be well-behaved and considerate, she herself appears stern to the point of meanness. Julie Andrews's performance never crosses into the borderline unkindness that her literary counterpart occasionally displays. Although strict in her demands, she turns chores into games and medicine into sweets.[26] Mary Poppins treats the magical adventures in a remarkably no-nonsense manner without ever resorting to calling the children liars outright in the mode of the books. She simply acts as though nothing out of the ordinary occurs, calmly ignoring any questions or statements she does not wish to address.

Most often, Mary Poppins casually uses her magic with a straightforward pretense that nothing unusual is happening. The children first witness this practice as Mary Poppins slides up the banister to the nursery then unpacks a series of unlikely objects from her magical carpetbag. Prior to the chalk-drawing adventure, Bert unsubtly references the extraordinary nature of Mary Poppins's outings. While she denies his statements as hyperbole, Mary Poppins begrudgingly agrees to take them into the drawing, enhanced by an eye roll, when Bert's attempt fails. After the outing, Mary Poppins expresses astonishment at the suggestion that she would ever enter, much less win, a horse race, but her disavowal reads as vaguely disbelieving rather than sharp. Rather than pretend the children are irrational or foolish, she coolly ignores their excitement. Furthermore, any potential unkindness is immediately softened by song.

The scenes in which Julie Andrews truly shines, as well as representing the most marked differences from the novel versions of Mary Poppins, are the musical numbers. The first instance of Mary Poppins as singing nanny occurs in the song "Spoonful of Sugar." Throughout this number, Mary Poppins displays her high standards in an altogether unintimidating way. Her spoken introduction to the song is didactic without being stern. Whereas Travers's character demands impeccable manners and cleanliness from her charges, Andrews teaches them using a combination of music and magic. This connection between magical and musical practice stems from earlier Disney films, including the nearly contemporaneous *The Sword in the Stone*. In the slightly earlier animated film, the Sherman brothers established a link between magic and music via the character Merlin. Moreover, the aging wizard employed these practices as a means of educating the future King Arthur. The Sherman brothers continue to use these ideas in *Mary Poppins*, setting up the associations between learning, music, and magic in "Spoonful." Mary Poppins creatively teaches the children the importance of chores, and the trio cleans the room with ease.

Additionally, the children (and the audience) learn this lesson via the sparkling voice of Julie Andrews. As Wolf asserts, Andrews's vocal quality brings a number of connotations, including a "good, innocent, and properly feminine" image, which further has "cultural associations with whiteness, virginity, and money."[27] Harnessed to perfection in the Disney film, these impressions of Andrews—particularly through her voice—demonstrate her appropriateness as nanny for the Banks children and ultimately healer of the family. "Spoonful" highlights these associations in very specific ways throughout the song. For example, Mary Poppins literally sings with songbirds. Her clear, sweet tone matches the similar qualities of the birdsong. Her ability to sing in counterpoint with birds also demonstrates her affinity with nature—a common trope of innocence and goodness in Disney films (as shown in the characters of Snow White or Cinderella). Furthermore, she explicitly shows this affinity to the children. While the literary Mary Poppins can talk to animals, only babies—who can also understand and talk to animals—witness this sign of childlike wonder and purity. The older children, now unable to talk to animals due to their age, never see this side of their caretaker. In the Disney film, however, this association charms Jane and Michael.

In fact, Andrews's performance is calculated to charm rather than alienate either the children or the audience. Not only does the film set up her affiliation with nature via her voice, Andrews's vocal skill even becomes a sight gag in "Spoonful." Throughout the song, Andrews utilizes her famously clear voice in order to effectively teach the children the benefits of doing their chores as well as the potential enjoyment to be had at the feeling of a job well done. In addition to visually and aurally likening Andrews's voice to songbirds, Andrews sings with the mirror image of herself toward the end of the song. In harmonizing with her reflection, "A Spoonful of Sugar" provides Mary Poppins/Julie Andrews the opportunity to show off her already renowned voice without making her appear as overly vain as compared to her literary counterpart.

The brief section displays Andrews's impressive vocal range and flexibility. At first, the nanny's reflection merely mimics the main melody in a call and response motive on the transitional lyrics "and hence." Mary Poppins then happily sings the main melody of "Spoonful," while the reflection alternately sings a fourth and a third higher. Carried away, the mirror image of Mary Poppins decides to show off by singing a short cadenza which ends on a high B flat (as can be heard in ▶ Video example 12.1). Mary Poppins rolls her eyes at the reflection, calling it cheeky (Figure 12.2). In this way, the small moment skillfully shows Andrews's vocal prowess to its best advantage and allows her to remain humble—it is the magical *reflection* showboating, not the "real" version. Julie Andrews as presented is remarkable with enough humility to draw us in. When her

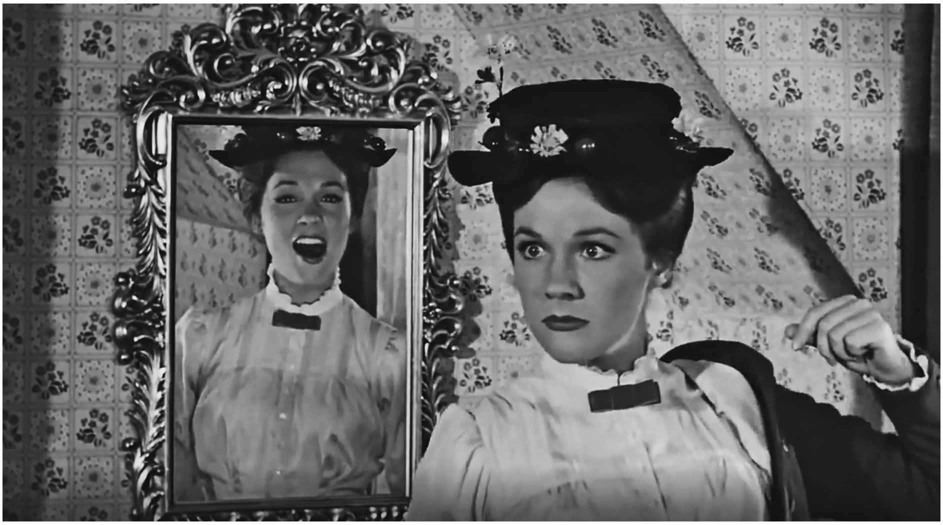


**FIGURE 12.2** Mary Poppins annoyed at her "cheeky" reflection from *Mary Poppins* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1964).

measuring tape refers to Mary Poppins as "practically perfect in every way," we are inclined to believe it.

While brisk with the Banks children, Mary Poppins makes cleaning one's room seem like a game. Like sugar, Andrews's characteristic sweet voice "helps the medicine go down." In their first lesson, Jane and Michael inexpertly employ the magic imparted by Mary Poppins. They snap their fingers, and the room (sort of) obeys. However, the pair do not yet sing.[28] They have yet to master their lessons. Since the film links music and magic with learning, the children cannot command the inanimate objects in the expert manner of Mary Poppins. When she hands over the task to the children, they quickly lose control and the toys, closets, and drawers all go haywire. Mary Poppins loses patience, not with the children, but with the room itself. This represents a marked difference in character from her literary counterpart. The Mary Poppins of the books is quick to snap at her charges; the Disney version blames the objects for getting overexcited and ruining her lesson.

The Sherman brothers also include Mary Poppins in the light, entertainment song style used in the chalk-drawing sequence. While the bones of this sequence come from the novel, the inclusion of the Banks children represents a fairly stark change. In the book version, Mary Poppins spends her afternoons off at tea with Bert. On one occasion, he does not have the money to take her out, so she arranges for a different type of outing for the two of them. In the Disney film, Bert and Mary Poppins are joined by the Banks children. As such, they experience this particular adventure and, significantly, witness their nanny in the holiday spirit. Bert and Mary do send the children off on their own with a few instructions ("don't smudge the drawing!") in order to spend some time together. The couple clearly has a history and is becoming reacquainted.

The song "Jolly Holiday" illustrates their pleasure and ease in each other's company. Bert and various animated animals sing the praises of spending time with Mary Poppins in this jaunty tune (Figure 12.3). Throughout the number, Mary Poppins consistently looks delighted, skipping through the drawing with Bert and actively displaying a sense of wonderment. Her movements are delicate and dainty, in accordance with her fancy "outing" dress, and she remains unfailingly polite to all of the cartoon animals. Over four and a half minutes into the sequence, Mary Poppins sings a verse of the tune. In Andrews's easy, light soprano, she sings Bert's praises for never making overt sexual advances. Tim Stephenson interprets Mary Poppins's explicitly unromantic attitude toward Bert as indicative of her character as a feminist model, which "not only challenged traditional views but arguably established a new standard for female representation in the musical."[29] She rejects heteronormative expectations for a young, attractive woman out with an equally attractive, charming man. In this short verse, the Disney film successfully reinforces the image of Mary Poppins—and by extension, Julie Andrews—as proper and virginal or even simply asexual.

The most famous song in the film, "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious," also occurs in the chalk-drawing sequence. In this number, the children watch on as Mary Poppins sings about her elation at winning the carousel race. This song represents the most acknowledged performance of Mary Poppins, using the music hall/vaudeville style

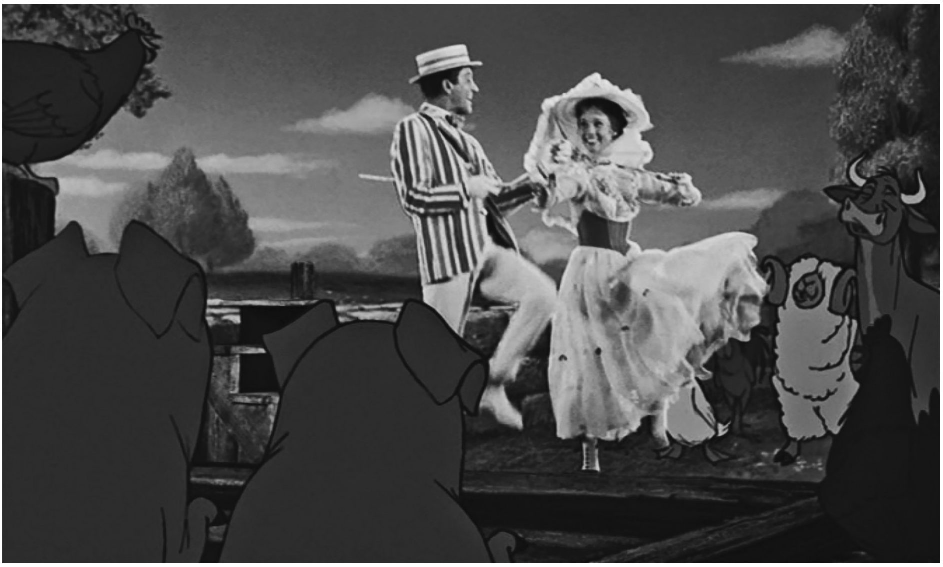


**FIGURE 12.3** Live-Action Bert and Mary Poppins with animated animals from *Mary Poppins* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1964).

recognized by Andrews without being an explicit stage performance.[30] The focus of the song is the title nonsense word. In true Disney and Sherman brothers fashion, the made-up word drives the song. In earlier examples, such as "Bibbitti-bobbitti-boo" from *Cinderella* and the Shermans' "Higitus Figitus" from *The Sword in the Stone*, the made-up lyrics represent magical practice (similar to Abracadabra but trademarked by Disney). In "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious," the lyric represents joyful but otherwise inexpressible emotions. The song sits in Andrews's lower range with more use of her chest voice than in any of the other songs and even features some talk-singing for the verses. As such, it is not vocally virtuosic but highlights the tongue-twister nature of the title lyric. Visually, the number also includes some light prop dancing for Bert and Mary Poppins. As a whole, the effect is pure fun. Mary Poppins figuratively "lets her hair down," as the Banks children watch.

In addition to revealing a fun side, Mary Poppins also demonstrates her gentle nature through song. Twice in the film, the nanny sings the children to sleep. These lullabies expose a tenderness never displayed in the novels, as well as Jane and Michael's comfortable relationship with Mary Poppins. After she nonchalantly disregards and even renounces the magical outing in the pavement drawings, Mary Poppins instantaneously softens the exchange by singing to the children. In "Stay Awake," Mary Poppins employs some standard reverse psychology to the restless children, lulling them to sleep while ostensibly telling them to stay up as long as they want. She uses a whispery timbre in order to gently settle Jane and Michael down for their bedtime. "Feed the Birds," on the other hand, acts as a sort of bedtime story for the children. The song references the bird woman from the stories, using her wise woman status. The film, however, turns her role into a galvanizing one: Michael will want to give his tuppence to feed the birds rather than deposit it into the bank. In the loveliest song in the Shermans' score, Andrews's delicate soprano voice shines. There is no flashy singing, but her clarity comes through to great advantage, with soft accordion and strings dominating the accompaniment. Her voice visibly weaves a spell around the children. Significantly, both Jane and Michael fall fast asleep during both songs. The warmth and safety, which Mary Poppins exudes in these songs, relax them. The cultural associations of lullabies reinforce the motherly aspect that Mary Poppins embodies within these songs—something that Disney shows the Banks children crave.

## Mary Poppins's Companion: Dick Van Dyke as Bert

The songs discussed in the previous section reveal traits of Mary Poppins, which endear her to both the Banks children as characters and the audience. Her relationship and interactions with Bert, as indicated in the chalk-drawing sequence, also play an important role. As such, Bert's own characterization and the star persona of Dick Van Dyke represent another key facet to Disney's adaptation of Travers's books. The film version of Bert is an amalgamation of two characters from the books: Bert, a pavement street artist/matchman, and the Sweep, a chimney sweep. The film's Bert is a jack-of-all-trades, using various skills to earn a living using whatever means accessible to him. Similar to his literary counterpart, Bert is a close friend of Mary Poppins. The two take tea together every week in the first book, and the film makes it clear that the pair have a pleasantly companionable history. While Travers's description of the friends' relationship implies that the aloof Mary Poppins prefers to keep her private life separate from work, the film's Bert accompanies the nanny and Banks children on a number of their adventures. He is a much more integral part of Jane and Michael's life, and ultimately helps to sway their struggling father. Bert emerges as a co-conspirator to Mary Poppins in her efforts to repair the Banks family.

Given Bert's status as Mary Poppins's "partner-in-crime," Dick Van Dyke's own persona and performance have an impact on the film's storyline. Interestingly, Van Dyke plays double roles in the film, both the joyous Bert and the old, curmudgeonly Mr. Dawes. Despite a truly atrocious attempt at a cockney accent for his portrayal of Bert, Van Dyke brings his considerable charm to both roles (but especially Bert). At the time of filming, Dick Van Dyke was primarily known for two major roles: Albert Peterson in *Bye Bye Birdie* and Rob Petrie in the *Dick Van Dyke Show*. Van Dyke not only originated the role of Albert Peterson in the 1960 Broadway production of *Birdie* but returned to the character in the 1963 film adaptation. With a pleasant, unaffected singing voice and a loose dance style that was untrained but full of natural talent, the actor had proved that he could help to carry a musical. He even won Best Featured

Actor in a Musical at the 1961 Tony Awards. He was also in the middle of the five-year run of the sitcom bearing his name starring as a comedy writer and family man opposite Mary Tyler Moore. As such, Van Dyke was a well-known and very current name. Furthermore, these characters, which he was most associated with, were remarkably wholesome ones. As a gangly, sometimes awkward yet charismatic featured actor, Dick Van Dyke brought just as many preconceived notions to his character as Julie Andrews.

Again, Van Dyke's Bert manages to delight in spite of the horrendous accent, and his interactions with Mary Poppins and the children both soften the nanny's image and teach the children life lessons. Bert and Mary Poppins invariably sing and/or dance together in their major shared scenes. In all of Bert's main numbers, Mary Poppins tends to join in on his fun. As discussed previously, she sings a verse in "Jolly Holiday," illustrating the infectious appeal of Bert's joyful spirit. Although disapproving of the situation, Mary Poppins also sings a verse of "I Love to Laugh," ostensibly in disdain for the annoying laughs of some people. Bert echoes her tune and description of different laughs. Although always quick to listen to and agree with Mary Poppins, Bert is the first to join Uncle Albert on the ceiling and sing with him. In matters of fun, Mary Poppins tends to display amusement and pleasure in spite of herself, letting Bert's irresistible enthusiasm influence her behavior.

She also sings a short duet with Bert at the end of "Chim Chim Cher-ee." This song acts as Bert's theme song, and as such, the jack-of-all-trades sings the tune throughout the film. The song's full statement, however, enters toward the end of the film when Bert is currently working as a chimney sweep. After an interlude, in which the children magically fly up the chimney, Bert and Mary Poppins follow. At this point, she (literally) sings the praises of spending time with chimney sweeps, Bert joins and the two end the number by harmonizing with one another (as heard in ▶ Video example 12.2). Dick Van Dyke's light, untrained tenor complements Andrews's stronger voice. Rick Altman claims that the pair's vocal compatibility is a "metaphor for the perfection of their relationship."[31] She, of course, outshines him vocally yet their timbres match well. Tim Stephenson reads their relationship as a challenge to heterosexual romance and indicative of Mary Poppins's feminist positioning. He states that "her aura is too mystical, too magical, and too domineering for her to ever be coerced by a mere man."[32] Instead, she shares a satisfying platonic relationship with Bert—a friendship that is well-matched even as Mary Poppins is the dominant partner.

The brief moments where Andrews and Van Dyke sing together highlights Mary Poppins's characterization in the film. She may be "practically perfect," as emphasized by Andrews's vocal skill, yet she is equally comfortable with Bert (and his economic status). Their easy relationship and compatible voices solidify this aspect of her character. In "Step in Time," Bert explicitly draws Mary Poppins into the sweeps' exuberant dance. The two dance together before he passes her off to another partner. Unsurprisingly, Mary Poppins cannot resist a bit of grandstanding in a brief contest of turns. She magically spins in the air, revealing her difference, even as she fits in with the social world of the sweeps. By augmenting the role of Bert to act as a foil to Mary Poppins, the Disney filmmakers create another dimension to the nanny less present in the literary depiction of her. Additionally, the blend of Van Dyke's and Andrews's individual star personas enhances the accessibility of Mary Poppins in the film version.

The combination of the Sherman team's songs and Julie Andrews's star persona, specifically as related to her vocal quality, inform the characterization of Mary Poppins. The Disney film harnesses these factors in order to create a distinct, iconic version of Mary Poppins—one not wholly divorced from Travers's character but with a markedly more lighthearted and gentler side to her nature. As Raymond Knapp succinctly summarizes, the shift from "a stern, unsentimental woman to someone who tries to be stern but can't seem to manage it, who is nearly always gentle of voice, and whose features soften fairly often into an indulgent smile and occasionally slide perilously close to simpering" does not work for all.[33] At the same time, Andrews's depiction of Mary Poppins is the exemplary version for many audience members. Therefore, it is her performance and the film as a whole to which later family musicals, and even specifically Mary Poppins–related productions, must contend.

*Mary Poppins* was a smash hit, in terms of both popular success and initial critical reception. The film grossed $31 million in its first release and has since garnered over $100 million with Disney's strategic re-release schedule.[34] Contemporary critics overwhelmingly praised the film, especially Andrews's performance and the Sherman brothers' songs. The *Variety* reviewer sums it up neatly, stating, "Julie Andrews' first appearance on the screen is a signal triumph and she performs as easily as she sings, displaying a fresh type of beauty nicely adaptable to the color cameras."[35] *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther makes a number of comparisons to Lerner and Loewe's *My Fair Lady*—especially apt since Andrews, who had originated the role of Eliza Doolittle on Broadway, had been passed over for the film adaptation.[36] Andrews, of course, would win the Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role in the subsequent Oscars ceremony. The film won four additional Academy Awards, including Best Score and Best Original Song ("Chim Chim Cher-ee") for Richard and Robert Sherman. As a resounding success, *Mary Poppins* launched Julie Andrews's film career and set a standard for family musicals in the 1960s.

## INFLUENCE AND LEGACY

The success of the film spawned a trend of child-friendly musicals in the later 1960s and into the 1970s. Spurred on by the unprecedented box-office success of Andrews's next musical film, *The Sound of Music* (1965), these later family musicals sought to capitalize on the perceived shoo-in for success. While a number of family-oriented musicals were released after *Mary Poppins*, both *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968) and *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1971) invite comparison for two major narrative reasons: the nurturing feminine presence, who initiates a sense of nuclear family, and the fantasy element.

Additionally, both of these films featured songs by Richard and Robert Sherman. Although neither film achieved anywhere near the commercial success of their predecessor, the influence of *Mary Poppins* on these later films is hard to deny.

Loosely based on Ian Fleming's 1964 novel, United Artists' *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* contains a number of similarities to *Mary Poppins*. Of course, the Sherman brothers wrote the songs, and with the name of the car handed to them by Fleming, the possibilities of songs built on nonsensical words and onomatopoeias—all preferred tactics by the songwriting team—reign. The film also stars Dick Van Dyke (blessedly not using a British accent despite the film's real-life setting, again in England). Unsurprisingly, the filmmakers asked Andrews to play the role of Truly Scrumptious. However, she declined because of the similarities to her previous nanny roles.[37] Instead, Sally Ann Howes played the romantic female lead. Given the fact that Howes also has a light soprano voice and had actually replaced Andrews as Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* on Broadway in 1958, the similarities are clear. In an effort to recreate the resounding success of *Mary Poppins*, the filmmakers of *Chitty* made a number of targeted decisions regarding the music and casting in order to draw in audiences. In a few short years, however, times had changed, and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* had only moderate success on a large budget.[38] The film could not compete with the tactics of so-called New Hollywood. More than that, Disney—as the purveyor of family entertainment—also had a family film based on a car released that year: *The Love Bug*. Matthew Kennedy contends that "while UA sought to better Disney with a silly car movie, Disney turned the tables."[39] And significantly, the company that made *Mary Poppins* would later produce their own extension of the family musical.

The 1971 musical film *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* also shares some similarities to Disney's earlier children's musical. In fact, Disney acquired the rights to Mary Norton's books *The Magic Bed-Knob; or, How to Become a Witch in Ten Easy Lessons* (1943) and *Bonfires and Broomsticks* (1947) and began work on the film while still negotiating with P. L. Travers. Since the Sherman brothers wrote the songs for both films and some overlap in pre-production work occurred, it is unsurprising that "The Beautiful Briny" was initially written for *Mary Poppins* but ultimately used in *Bedknobs*.[40] As with *Chitty*, Julie Andrews was once again approached to play the female lead in the family musical film. After her hesitation, the role of Eglantine Price—aspiring witch and reluctant caretaker of displaced children during World War II—went to Angela Lansbury. At the same time, *Bedknobs* does share casting with *Poppins* in David Tomlinson, who shifts from the stern Mr. Banks to the erstwhile charlatan Emelius Browne. Also similar to *Mary Poppins*, *Bedknobs* employs a mixture of live-action and animation in order to depict the real versus fantasy/magical worlds. The resemblances between *Mary Poppins* and *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* are strongly reinforced in the 2018 sequel *Mary Poppins Returns*. The film features an underwater sequence reminiscent of "The Beautiful Briny" sequence in *Bedknobs*. And Lansbury, not Andrews, makes a cameo appearance at the end of the film.[41] In leaning into a sense of cinematic nostalgia, *Mary Poppins Returns* loops in *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*, thereby explicitly aligning the two properties for the audience.

Beyond its more immediate impact on the subgenre of family film musicals, Disney's *Mary Poppins* has a clear legacy. Not only did the film help to develop and solidify Julie Andrews's star persona, it has remained intrinsic to her image over the decades. Wolf examines the depth of this nanny persona in relation to later behaviors and mild scandals. She observes that "the fact that Julie Andrews is not and does not behave like Mary Poppins or Maria generates 'indignation' in gossip-driven journalists."[42] Fans supposedly expect Andrews to be the wholesome nanny in concert with her early film roles. The continued link between Julie Andrews and Mary Poppins, in particular, is driven by the Disney Company's strategic re-release of the film. Throughout the decades, the 1964 film has had a number of home re-releases, which brings the film a new generation of audiences. In 1998, *Mary Poppins* became Disney's first DVD release, and the film has received three anniversary special editions in the years since (40th anniversary in 2004; 45th in 2009; and a 50th anniversary Blu-ray in 2013). The latest release contains numerous special features, including sing-along versions of songs, premiere footage, and short documentaries. And of course, the advent of Disney + allows subscribers to access the film regularly. As its own product, *Mary Poppins* continues to sell and engage family audiences.

The 1964 film has also entered into a complex intertextual relationship with more recent related properties. In 2004, a stage musical based on both the Disney film and additional stories from P. L. Travers's books opened on the West End (the show opened on Broadway in 2006). Producer Cameron Mackintosh acquired the rights for a stage production during Travers's lifetime. Given her distaste for the film treatment, Travers allowed Mackintosh the rights only if he involved British creators.[43] After the author's death in 1996, Mackintosh approached Disney Theatricals in order to collaborate on the stage version. The result is a musical that includes elements from the Disney film, including the Sherman brothers' songs, and newly written material. Rather than commission an entirely new score, the stage musical incorporates the Sherman team's beloved songs (though with multiple additions and changes). Of course, the way Mary Poppins is portrayed varies in live performance, but the stage musical allows for more theatricality in the depiction. When I saw the production in 2009, Mary Poppins's vanity was played as much more over-the-top and humorous, and she tended to exit the stage using large, baroque movements as a means of poking fun at her gracefulness.

While the stage musical must contend with the 1964 film, the two more recent Mary Poppins properties rely on familiarity with the original film in various ways. *Saving Mr. Banks* (2013) fictionalizes the early production of Disney's *Mary Poppins* when Travers spent time at the Disney studios prior to signing over the rights to Walt Disney. Unsurprisingly, the film valorizes Walt Disney and empathizes with the famously prickly Travers. The latter is done by creating an explicit link between Mr. Banks and Travers's father, particularly through childhood flashbacks. Significantly, Robert and Richard Sherman and their songs are prominently featured in *Saving Mr. Banks*, representing their contribution to the development of the film's interpretation as integral from the very beginning. The songs drive the representation of these beloved characters. In the context of *Saving Mr. Banks*'s narrative, "Let's Go Fly a Kite" becomes a pivotal moment in which Travers is won over. Songs, dialogue, a premiere scene with clips, and other aspects present throughout the film assume familiarity with *Mary Poppins* in order to fully appreciate the references. On a basic level, the mere concept of *Saving Mr. Banks* presupposes an audience who cares about how *Mary Poppins* came into being.

*Mary Poppins Returns* also plays on a sense of nostalgia. As discussed earlier, the film also references *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*, but of course, *Mary Poppins* represents the major intertextual touchstone. Jane and Michael Banks have grown up, and Michael has children and problems of his own. Various characters, episodes, and musical numbers all have similar counterparts in the original film. Indeed, the allusions are too many to list in this essay. One aspect that does bear mentioning is the use of the Shermans' tunes in the score. Although *Mary Poppins Returns* exclusively features new songs, the much-loved original melodies thread their way through the instrumental scoring. Similar to her stage counterparts, Emily Blunt's portrayal of the nanny must contend with Julie Andrews's original depiction. Notably, Blunt has a much lower vocal range than Andrews, bringing a completely different element into her performance. The 2018 film leans into a feeling of music hall style in "The Royal Doulton Music Hall" and "A Cover Is Not the Book" as well as the earthier, potentially saucier, singing style of Blunt. The musical number "Cover Is Not the Book" crosses from the performative nature of "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" into explicit, acknowledged stage performance. In general, Blunt's Mary Poppins is both more ironic and more expressive in her joy than Julie Andrews, who tends toward begrudgingly amused. Neither, however, is she the stern taskmaster of Travers's books. The 2018 sequel attempts to forge a new audience while including enough embedded material to please existing fans.

Whether through re-release or subsequent properties, the Disney Company keeps *Mary Poppins* alive for generations. Almost since the moment of its release, this film became a standard for family entertainment, especially for film musicals. The compelling musical numbers, and particularly the title character, have charmed children and adults alike for decades. Although several actors have played Mary Poppins in the twenty-first century, Julie Andrews remains not only the first but the most iconic portrayal. In refusing to make a cameo in the 2018 sequel, stating she wanted the film to be "Emily's show," Andrews acknowledged the place she has in the popular consciousness as Mary Poppins.[44] Her appearance would only heighten comparison of Emily Blunt's depiction to the original. In keeping the character a staple in American popular culture, Disney does not overshadow the impact or popularity of the 1964 film but reinforces it in powerful ways.

## NOTES

1. Two major sources that make this argument are Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), and Annalee R. Ward, *Mouse Morality: The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

2. Quoted in Valerie Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote: The Life of P. L. Travers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 165.
3. Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote*, 236.
4. Quoted in David Tietyen, *The Musical World of Walt Disney* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 1990), 128.
5. See Robert B. Sherman and Richard M. Sherman, *Walt's Time: From Before to Beyond* (Santa Clarita, CA: Camphor Tree, 1998), 28.
6. James Bohn, *Music in Disney's Animated Features: "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" to "The Jungle Book"* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 180.
7. Quoted in Sherman and Sherman, *Walt's Time*, 141.
8. Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 142.
9. Knapp, *The American Musical*, 142.
10. Geoffrey Block gives an excellent overview of integration in his essay "Integration," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 97–110.
11. See Knapp, *The American Musical*, 142–146, for a full discussion of the two parents' songs.
12. Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote*, 253–254.
13. Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote*, 149.
14. Patricia Demers, *P. L. Travers* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 86.
15. Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 113.
16. Anne McLeer, "Practical Perfection? The Nanny Negotiates Gender, Class, and Family Contradictions in 1960s Popular Culture," *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 85.
17. Chris Cuomo, "Thirteen Spinsters in Sensible Shoes *Mary Poppins* and *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*," in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, edited by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 212–223; and Tim Stephenson, *Mary Poppins*: A Precursor of the Feminist Musical?" in *The Disney Musical on Stage and Screen*, edited by George Rodosthenous (New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017).
18. Demers, *P. L. Travers*, 81.
19. Knapp, *The American Musical*, 142.
20. Julie Andrews et al., "My Favorite Things: Julie Andrews Remembers," *The Sound of Music* [DVD], directed by Robert Wise (Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century–Fox Home Entertainment, 1965).
21. Julie Andrews, *Home: A Memoir of My Early Years* (New York: Hyperion, 2008).
22. Andrews, *Home*, 281.
23. Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 139.
24. Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 140.
25. Peter Kemp, "How Do You Solve a 'Problem' Like Maria von Poppins?," in *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*, ed. Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell (Exeter, England: Intellect, 2000), 60.
26. The detail of Mary Poppins's magical medicine bottle does come from Travers's stories but would be absolutely denied by the nanny.
27. Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 140.

28. The children sing their advertisement before Mary Poppins arrives, using music to draw her to their plight.
29. Stephenson, *Mary Poppins*, 55.
30. Andrews, *Home*, 311.
31. Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 83.
32. Stephenson, *Mary Poppins*, 56.
33. Knapp, *The American Musical*, 141.
34. *Mary Poppins* has been released on home video formats nine times: 1980, 1988, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2004, 2009, and 2013.
35. *Variety*, "Mary Poppins," December 31, 1963.
36. Bosley Crowther, "*Mary Poppins*: Julie Andrews Stars as Famous Nanny," *New York Times*, September 25, 1964.
37. Matthew Kennedy, *Roadshow!: The Fall of Film Musicals in the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 160. At this time, Andrews was explicitly attempting to break out of her wholesome "nanny" persona.
38. Matthew Kennedy notes that Universal spent $12 million on *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and did make a profit; *Roadshow!*, 162.
39. Kennedy, *Roadshow!*, 162.
40. Sherman and Sherman, *Walt's Time*, 166.
41. Andrews declined the role of the Balloon Lady, intended for her.
42. Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria*, 132.
43. Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote*, 356.
44. Brent Lang and Marc Malkin, "*Mary Poppins Returns*: Why Julie Andrews Turned Down a Cameo," *Variety*, November 30, 2018, https://variety.com/2018/film/awards/mary-poppins-returns-julie-andrews-1203065856.

# CHAPTER 13

# DEVELOPING THE SCREENPLAY FOR *SINGIN' IN THE RAIN* (1952)

ANDREW BUCHMAN

In 2019, Jeanine Basinger wrote that "*Singin' in the Rain* does what musicals are supposed to do. . . . The integration between the story and the music is exemplary."[1] This harmonious combination required many collaborative revisions between August 1950, when Betty Comden (1917–2006) and Adolph Green (1915–2002) completed their first draft of the script, through March 1952, when producer Arthur Freed (1894–1973) approved substantial cuts just before the film's nationwide release. Some of the screenwriters' wickedest wit was sacrificed in the process. Other adjustments simplified the main characters, minimized the roles of minor characters, and completely altered the initial ordering of songs and dances at the behest of co-director, choreographer, and star Gene Kelly (1912–1996).

*Singin'* was intended to be a modestly budgeted vanity project built around a catalogue of old songs with lyrics by Freed and music by Nacio Herb Brown (1896–1964). The pair had already earned fortunes in royalties from four of these songs, featured in two early MGM musicals introduced in 1929: "Singing in the Rain," "Wedding of the Painted Doll," "You Were Meant for Me," and "Broadway Melody." During 1930, Brown and Freed each received $250 a week from MGM and $500,000 in royalties on sheet music and 78 rpm record sales from the American Society of Authors, Composers, and Publishers (ASCAP).[2] Brown and Freed composed most of the songs in *Singin' in the Rain* for films released in the 1930s: "Broadway Rhythm," "Fit as a Fiddle," "All I Do Is Dream of You," "I've Got a Feelin' You're Foolin'," "Should I?," "Beautiful Girl," "You Are My Lucky Star," "Good Morning," and "Would You?"[3] Two songs, "Make 'Em Laugh" (by Brown and Freed) and "Moses Supposes" (by Comden, Green, and Edens), were written specifically for *Singin'*. Lena Horne's husband Lennie Hayton (1908–1971) devised or supervised the musical arrangements and underscoring.[4] Seven songs (in boldface in Table 13.1) were retained from the original script, but six were placed in

Table 13.1 Musical Numbers in the Completed Film

| Title [numbers in boldface also appear in Table 13.2.] | Sung by | Starts at |
|---|---|---|
| **"Singin' in the Rain"** | Kathy, Cosmo, and Don | 0:00:21 |
| **"Fit as a Fiddle"** | Cosmo and Don | 0:05:57 |
| **"All I Do Is Dream of You"** | Kathy and Ensemble | 0:23:08 |
| "Make 'Em Laugh" | Cosmo | 0:27:41 |
| "Beautiful Girl Montage," including arrangements of "I've Got a Feelin' You're Foolin'," "The Wedding of the Painted Doll," "Should I?," and "Beautiful Girl" | | 0:34:42 |
| **"You Were Meant for Me"** | Don | 0:42:40 |
| "Moses Supposes" | Cosmo and Don | 0:48:38 |
| "Good Morning" | Kathy, Cosmo, and Don | 1:02:48 |
| **"Singin' in the Rain"** (reprise) | Don | 1:07:55 |
| **"Would You?"** | Kathy (dubbing Lina) | 1:13:31 |
| "Broadway Ballet"—**"The Broadway Melody"** and "Broadway Rhythm" | Don | 1:15:33 |
| **"Would You?"** (reprise) | Don and Kathy (dubbing Lina) | 1:34:32 |
| **"Singin' in the Rain"** (reprise) | Kathy (dubbing Lina) | 1:39:42 |
| **"You Are My Lucky Star"** | Kathy and Don | 1:41:07 |

Source: "Singin' in the Rain," American Film Institute Catalogue of Feature Films. Accessed online September 1, 2019, at https://catalog.afi.com/Catalog/moviedetails/50652. Timings from 2002 2-DVD release of film.

new dramatic contexts in the finished film; only "Fit as a Fiddle" stayed in place. (See Tables 13.1 and 13.2.)

Kelly's previous film, *An American in Paris* (1951), had a substantial budget ($2,723,903), including payments for onetime film rights to the Gershwin tunes in the score and $542,000 for the final dream ballet sequence.[5] The investment paid off—the film swept up six Oscars in 1952 including Best Picture, an honor for a musical shared previously only by *Broadway Melody* (1929), with songs (including some reused in *Singin' in the Rain*) by Brown and Freed, and *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936). Although *Singin'* made much less of a splash, it ended up costing almost as much to make ($2,540,800, $620,996 over budget) after a two-minute fashion show sequence and a thirteen-minute-long ballet costing around $600,000 were added to the film during production.[6] In 1953, *Singin' in the Rain* received two nominations but no Oscars.[7] Since that time the renown of the two films has reversed. In 2005 film historian Steven Cohan wrote, "Today, most everyone agrees that, transcending this initial purpose [as a showcase for Freed and Brown's old songs],

Table 13.2 Musical Numbers in the First Draft of the Script

| Title [numbers in boldface also appear in Table 13.1.] | Sung by | Page |
|---|---|---|
| **"Fit as a Fiddle"** | Don and Cosmo | 5 |
| Piano and violin mood music | Don and Cosmo (play) | 7 |
| "Fit as a Fiddle" reprise on piano | Cosmo (on piano) | 9 |
| Tchaikovsky, *Romeo and Juliet* Overture | Cosmo (on piano) | 12 |
| Dance music (unspecified) | A band in R.F.'s ballroom accompanies "dancing couples" and "a girl doing the Charleston." | 24 |
| **"You Are My Lucky Star"** | Kathy | 29 |
| Paderewski Minuet | Cosmo (on piano) | 33 |
| Piano selection (unspecified) | Cosmo (on piano) | 33 |
| "Old Grey Mare She Ain't What She Used to Be" | Cosmo (on piano) | 34 |
| Theme from Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* | Cosmo (on piano) | 36 |
| Austrian National Hymn | Cosmo (on piano) | 38 |
| "Mammy's Boy" (lyrics by Comden and Green) | Cosmo (sings and plays) | 39 |
| "I'm a Dueling Cavalier" (lyrics by Comden and Green) | Cosmo (sings and plays) | 39 |
| "Chant of the Jungle" / **"Would You?"** / **"Broadway Melody"** | Don and Kathy | 48 |
| Musical Number (unspecified) | Don and Cosmo | 62 |
| **"Singing in the Rain"** | Kathy, Don, and Cosmo | 65 |
| Famous piano concerto [in *Piano-playing Pioneer*] | Cosmo (on piano) | 69 |
| **"All I Do Is Dream of You"** | Kathy (dubbing Lina) | 70 |
| **"You Were Meant for Me"** | Kathy and Don | 74 |
| Unspecified | Kathy singing for Lina live | 87 |
| Big Musical Number—Finale (unspecified) | Unspecified | 88 |

Source: *Singin' in the Rain (marked temporary incomplete [i.e., without most musical numbers], August 10, 1950 with inserted pages dated as late as September 14, 1950)*, MGM script 2642-f.1234, Academy Library, Los Angeles.

*Singin' in the Rain* epitomizes the Freed unit and Gene Kelly's artistry in perfecting the movie musical."[8]

Comden and Green had their own version of the story of the film's creation. According to Comden, Freed said, " 'Well, kids, your next movie is going to be called *Singing in the Rain*, and it's going to have all my songs in it.' And that was that. That was the *whole* assignment. And it may not sound very difficult, but it was terribly hard to do, almost impossible."[9] The many contributions of others imply a more complex genesis closer to what co-director, choreographer, and star Kelly called "the game" in a speech at a gala celebrating his life and work in 1985. "There are no *auteurs* in musical movies. The name of the game is collaboration."[10] This chapter traces the chronology of the film's creation, summarized in Table 13.3; presents at least some of the reasons why so many changes were made; and suggests that, while the changes may have strengthened the film overall, they also sanitized the characters and streamlined the story.[11] As a result, Basinger qualified her praise for the film by adding, "It's safe. And it's simple."[12]

Comden and Green began salaried work on *Singing in the Rain* on May 29, 1950. In their first draft script dated August 10, 1950, the pair delivered a vivid satire with a narrative arc close in many respects to the finished film, but with dialogue (some of it bitingly funny) and suggestions for musical numbers that didn't survive. Many critics have discerned literary themes in what is a fictionalized history of a crucial episode in film industry, including critiques of celebrity culture and the hidden technological wizardry that makes stars seem better than they are. Just as they did in their next script for *The Band Wagon* (1953), Comden and Green hid "a modern musical morality tale with meaning and stature" within "a cute little musical comedy."[13] But almost all of Comden and Green's suggestions for which songs to sing, and where, were rejected.

Two collaborators stand out during this preparatory phase. Composer (and uncredited associate producer) Roger Edens (1905–1970) played a stack of old Freed songs for the screenwriters' consideration (presumably on the grand piano in his corner office at MGM) and coordinated subsequent musical arrangements with the music staff. Kelly credited Edens with devising the wordless riff at the start of the song "Singin' in the Rain" in the movie.[14] The motive is an improvement upon a sequential flourish in the piano introduction to the song in the sheet music version published in 1929.[15] Co-director Stanley Donen (1924–2019) watched a series of MGM movies from the 1930s with the screenwriters. While Comden and Green rejected any outright adaptation in favor of what they called an original story, they employed narrative and visual elements drawn from platinum blonde Jean Harlow's film *Bombshell* (1931) and silent screen idol John Gilbert's early sound film *His Glorious Night* (1929).[16]

Some of their characters were inspired by specific contemporary actors. Gene Kelly and Oscar Levant were mentioned by name in the first-draft script for the roles of Don Lockwood and Cosmo Cosgrove, respectively. Comden and Green's close friend Judy Holliday created the memorable role of Billie Dawn in both the 1946 stage and 1950 film version of Garson Kanin's play *Born Yesterday.* Jean Hagen understudied Holliday's role in the play and devised her own original variations on the alternately sweet and strident vocal timbres required to play Billie for her performance as Lina Lamont in *Singin' in the Rain*.

Casting changes necessitated more revisions but also furthered those integrations between dance, music, and story Basinger admired. Donald O'Connor replaced Levant, who could only minimally sing or dance, and the role of Cosmo Brown was extensively rewritten to suit the twenty-five-year-old comic dancer.[17] Kelly chose

**Table 13.3 Chronology of Script Drafts and Related Events for *Singin' in the Rain*.**[a]

| Date | Description |
|---|---|
| 1949-01-28 | Treatment, adapted from Jack MacGowan's *Excess Baggage* by Ben Feiner Jr.[b] |
| *1950-05-29* | *Comden and Green begin salaried work* |
| 1950-08-10 | First Script, Temporary Complete Script[c] |
| 1950-10-05 | Temporary Complete Script[d] |
| *1950-10-21* | *Comden and Green go off salary* |
| *1951-03-26* | *Comden and Green go on salary* |
| 1951-04-11 | OK Script [okayed by Freed for production][e] |
| *1951-03-27* | *Jerry Davis on payroll* |
| *1951-04-02* | *Debbie Reynolds begins dance rehearsals* |
| *1951-04-14* | *Comden and Green go off salary* |
| *1951-04-18* | *Jerry Davis off payroll; worked 3½ days total* |
| *1951-04-23* | *Gene Kelly begins dance rehearsals* |
| *1951-04-26* | *Donald O'Connor begins dance rehearsals* |
| *1951-06-18* | *Shooting begins* |
| 1951-07-20 | Revised script[f] |
| 1951-07-26 | Draft of new finale by Joseph Fields (not used)[g] |
| *1951-11-21* | *Shooting ends* |
| No date | Continuity Script prepared for film editing (file copy dated March 17, 1952)[h] |
| No date | Palimpsest Script—"Okay script" with manuscript and typed revisions[i] |
| *1952-03-27* | *Premiere, Radio City Music Hall, New York* |
| *1952-04-11* | *General Release* |

[a] Key to Locations of Documents: AL = Margaret Herrick Library / Academy Library; USC = USC Cinematic Library; NYPL = Research Collections at Lincoln Center Library Research Division. (Items in **boldface** are discussed in the chapter.) Sources: Los Angeles, USC Cinematic Library, Arthur Freed Collection, Box 2, Singin' in the Rain [Assistant Director's reports], 1951 April 2–1952 Jan 10. Note on folder: "July 17-18-19, 1951/"Singin' In The Rain" number shot/8/15–11/6/51/"Broadway Melody" No.; and Los Angeles, Margaret Herrick Library, Rudy Behlmer papers, folder 47: "America's Favorite Movies—research (SINGIN' IN THE RAIN). In this folder are filed sixteen large notecards filled with notes made at USC and Academy Libraries, ("ACADEMY"), one notecard-size photocopy of a newspaper article, and a copy of the document of cuts, below, with underlines added in pencil (by Behlmer, for emphasis?). There is also a copy of this document at USC, in the Arthur Freed Papers, Box 23, Folder 1, titled "eliminations made from Singing in the rain [*sic*]," with a cover memo from J. J. Cohn to Freed and Donen dated April 11, 1952.

[b] AL, Turner/MGM Scripts, 2642-f.S-1233.

[c] AL, Turner/MGM scripts, 2642-f.S-1234.

[d] AL, Turner/MGM scripts, 2642-f.S-1235. Also NYPL, Comden & Green Papers Box 9 Folder 6, with revisions dated to October 14.

[e] NYPL, Comden Papers, Box 12, Folder 11.

[f] NYPL, Green Papers, Box 12, folder 3.

[g] AL, Turner/MGM scripts, folder 1241.

[h] NYPL, CTR 1390 and Comden Papers, Box 12, folder 12.

[i] NYPL, Comden & Green Papers, Box 9, Folder 7.

another rising star with ballet training, Cyd Charisse, as his mute partner in the interpolated dream ballet. Agnes de Mille established a trend of substituting dancers for actors in the dream ballet for *Oklahoma!* (1943), and Kelly did the same for the dream ballet in his first collaboration with Comden and Green in 1949's *On the Town* (excepting Kelly and his versatile costar Vera-Ellen). Nevertheless, Debbie Reynolds's lack of ballet training is frequently cited as the reason for casting Charisse.

Reynolds, nineteen, groomed by MGM for stardom—she made the cover of *Life* magazine on February 26, 1951—was cast by Freed as Kathy Selden, Lina's rival for Don's affections. Kelly was a dance teacher before he was an actor, and just as he had discovered and worked with nineteen-year-old Leslie Caron in *An American in Paris*, he tutored and partnered Reynolds. Although she was a fine athlete (a gymnast), Reynolds was not as well trained a dancer as Caron, and Kelly (as O'Connor observed) was a stern taskmaster. Reynolds received two months of dance lessons with associates of Kelly's before production began.[18] Most of Reynolds's singing was dubbed by an uncredited double, Betty Noyes, and some of her dialogue was dubbed by Jean Hagen (ironically, Hagen even dubbed the scenes of Kathy dubbing Lina's words—a double dub).[19] Employing invisible vocal doubles for Reynolds contradicted the screenwriters' critique (as presented in their script) of vocal dubbing as a corrupt practice. Of course, vocal looping, even by actors dubbing their *own* voices, detracts from the perceived authenticity of live performances in a film. But it is just one of a series of largely invisible editorial processes inherent to film as a medium, including casting, set designs, costumes, shot selection, image editing, and underscoring.

Comden and Green's final script draft, written in an intense spurt of three weeks on salary beginning March 26, 1951, received Freed's crucial "OK" on April 11.[20] The writers met with Kelly daily during these weeks when almost all the musical numbers were revamped. Rehearsals began April 2, 1951, shooting began June 18, and the film wrapped just before the Thanksgiving holiday on November 22.[21] During much of this crucial last phase, Comden and Green were in New York at work on a new Broadway stage revue, *Two on the Aisle.* They continued their amicable collaboration with co-directors Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen via long-distance phone calls. A heavily revised draft of the "OK" script, a palimpsest made up largely of scribbled-over pages from other drafts now housed at the New York Public Library, sheds light on the substantive late script revisions probably suggested by Kelly over the long-distance telephone and the working methods of Comden and Green over many months of work.[22]

Archival evidence suggests that during production Kelly became the principal agent for further script revisions, reviewed with Comden and Green over the telephone, approved or mailed in by the writers from New York, or typed up by office staff in Los Angeles. A script doctor, the playwright and Broadway librettist Joseph Fields, covertly crafted a new (but unsatisfactory) ending that summer before an improved version of Comden and Green's original ending was adopted. Kelly's interpolated dream ballet made the first cut of the film two hours long. After previews of this version, audience feedback and kibitzing from studio executives led to extensive cuts reviewed and approved by Freed, summarized in Table 13.4.[23]

**Table 13.4 Summary of Post-Production Cuts to *Singin' in the Rain.***

| Cuts in Songs and Dances | Timings (approximate) |
|---|---|
| Ext. Don's Mansion[a] (Sc. 31x6) | 2 minutes |
| Ext. & Int. Don's House ["Dream of You"][b] (Sc. 57x1–57x2) | 4 minutes |
| Int. Stage[c] (Sc. 60A and 60x1) | 1⅔ minutes |
| Int. Stage "Beautiful Girl"[d] (Sc. 70x3) | 2 minutes |
| Musical Montage[e] (Sc. 70x1–x2) | 1 minute |
| Ext. Billboard "Lucky Star"[f] (Sc. 76x1) | 4 minutes |
| SUBTOTAL | 15 minutes (estimate) |
| OTHER CUTS | |
| Ext. Street Corner Fruit Stand (Scene 15x1) | 28 seconds |
| Ext. Billboards[g] (Sc. 31x1 to 31x4) | 22 seconds |
| Int. Chinese Theatre[h] (Sc. 31x8 to 46) | 1 minute |
| Int. Simpson Home[i] (Scenes 51 to 56) | 1½ minutes |
| Ext. & Int. Theater[j] (Sc. 88 to 109) | 45 seconds |
| Int. Sound Stage (Scene not specified) | 45 seconds |
| SUBTOTAL | 6 minutes (estimate) |
| **TOTAL post-production cuts** | **19.05 minutes** |
| (accurate estimate; 1,705 feet of film at 90 feet per minute) | |
| **TOTAL Sunk Costs $ 142,985** | |

SOURCE: Los Angeles, USC Cinematic Library, Arthur Freed Papers, Box 23, Folder 1, table titled "Eliminations Made from Singing in the Rain," with a cover memo from J. J. Cohn to Freed and Donen dated April 11, 1952. Note: 90 feet of 35mm film at 24 frames per second = one minute of screen time.

[a] End of Don's life story—this is a wild party scene, to contrast with the "good books, fine music" speech.

[b] A solo reprise of "All I Do Is Dream of You" sung and danced by Don. This was the last scene to be shot, November 19–21, 1951. See Singin' in the Rain [Assistant Director's reports], 1951 April 2–1952 Jan 10, Arthur Freed Papers, Box 22, Folder 11, USC.

[c] Cosmo improvises Al Jolson-style routines at piano.

[d] Dialogue during and after "Beautiful Girl." Don recognizes Kathy in the chorus. Kathy explains that she left town and joined a Midwest touring troupe after being fired at Lina's behest.

[e] Portions of the musical montage incorporating a medley of several songs.

[f] A solo version of "You Are My Lucky Star" sung by Kathy.

[g] Billboards of Don and Lina embracing advertising four previous silent films.

[h] Additional vignettes onscreen and in the audience during the silent film's premiere.

[i] Cosmo flirts with someone at the party at R.J.'s house.

[j] Additional vignettes onscreen and in the audience during the flawed sound film's premiere.

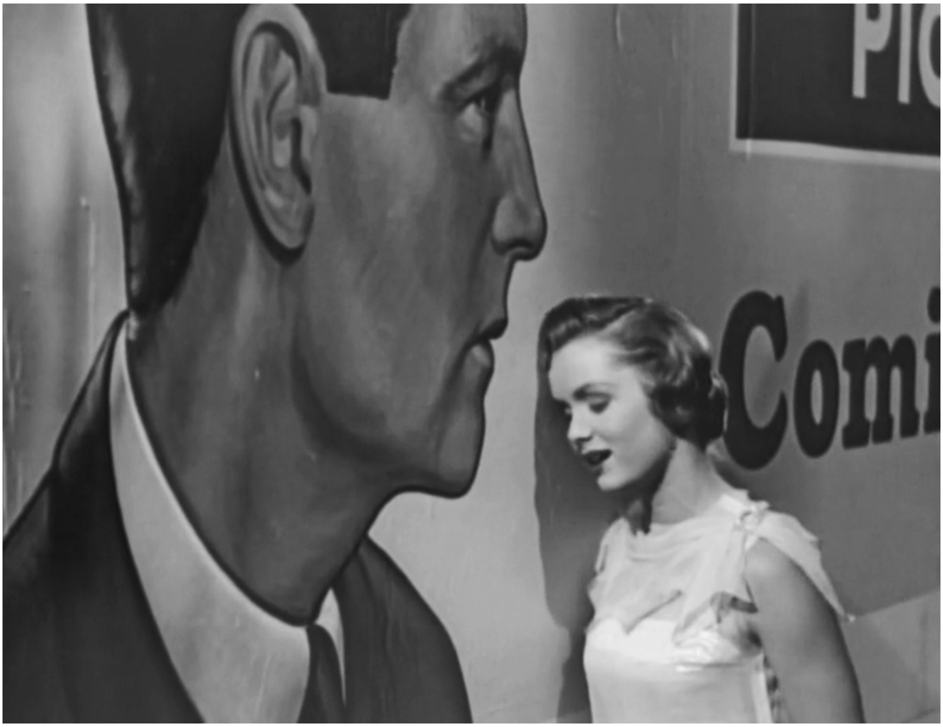


**FIGURE 13.1** Debbie Reynolds as Kathy Selden singing "You Are My Lucky Star" next to a billboard picturing Don Lockwood and Lina Lamont. Source: *The Making of "Singin' in the Rain,"* documentary film (Turner Entertainment Co., 2002 [included on 2-DVD set of *Singin' in the Rain*]), 20:35.

The cuts eliminated two musical numbers entirely: Kelly's solo version of "All I Do Is Dream of You" sung and danced by Don in his bedroom (Scene 57, featuring a particularly imaginative instrumental arrangement of the song coauthored by Hayton and Conrad Salinger) and Reynolds's corresponding solo version of "You Are My Lucky Star" including a new introductory verse with words and music composed by Edens, sung by Kathy to a billboard for *The Dueling Cavalier* featuring profiles of Don and Lina (Scene 76).[24] This scene prefigured the film's ending, when Don and Kathy gaze at a similar billboard advertising a new film titled *Singin' in the Rain* as a chorus echoes their immediately preceding duet version of "You Are My Lucky Star" (see Figure 13.1). The macabre humor of substituting Kathy's image for Lina's in otherwise identical billboards disappeared with Kathy's one solo.

The song "Beautiful Girl" and the musical medley preceding it were trimmed. A duet and dance by Don and Cosmo to "Wedding of the Painted Doll" had already been replaced by Cosmo's solo number, "Make 'Em Laugh." Freed cut dialogue and diegetic underscoring in Scenes 59 and 60. In the "OK" script versions of these scenes Cosmo, in conversation with the director Roscoe Dexter, comes up with a grisly ending for Don and Lina's new picture in progress. Cosmo suggests that the villain might fix a malfunctioning guillotine, then accidentally chop off his own head in the process. "Like it?" Cosmo asks Dexter, brightly. "Swell," Dexter replies.[25] Cosmo then cattily underscores Lina's entrance onto the set with a rendition of "The Old Grey Mare" on the piano. Freed also shortened Lina and Don's following love/hate scene, in which they act out their love while speaking of their hatred for one another ("I'd rather kiss a tarantula").[26]

Freed cut a raucous party scene featuring a live dance band during which Don is thrown into the swimming pool, contrasting with Don's earnest description of his home life as "sober and quiet." A preceding series of quick shots of billboards advertising pictures starring Don and Lina together also disappeared, despite their connection to both Kathy's solo version of "You Are My Lucky Star" and the movie's last scene. The titles of the faux films on the series of billboards were vintage Comden and Green alliterative spoofs: *The Battling Banditti*, *The Prince of Pirates*, *The Beggar of Bangkok*, and *The Scar of Zigmund*.[27] These trims may have saved screen time and made Cosmo more likable. But family-friendly cuts like these led to Basinger's critique of the film as "safe" and Cohan's complex interpretation of the film as "mainstream camp."[28]

In addition to these major cuts, minor trims subtracted another six minutes. Of these, the largest trimmed dialogue from both Kathy and Cosmo. After Kathy boasted to the other dancers from the Cocoanut Grove about picking up, then telling off the famous Don Lockwood, Cosmo flirted at R.F's party with "a pretty girl on his lap" (Scenes 51–56).[29] While one can lament the loss of footage due to poor archival decisions (which makes a final decision on the matter impossible), Freed's cuts eliminating almost one sixth of the film seem on the whole a set of wise choices. If some wit and wickedness was subtracted from the dialogue and characters and some unique performances disappeared, the price was probably worth paying, judging from the film's immediate financial success and subsequent reputational ascension. For better or for worse, with these cuts Freed also decisively established that he played a major editorial role, not just guiding but shaping the film.

Freed was often portrayed by employees (including Comden, Green, and Kelly) as a beneficent, distant figure who treated his talent with an unusual amount of respect and let them work with minimal interference. While true enough, this description conveys an incomplete picture. On *Singin'*, Freed's early choices of talent and his approval of extensive cuts to the finished film were crucial contributions. Archival records also complicate some of Comden and Green's assertions about Freed's role in this particular film's genesis and production as they perceived it—not least because they worked primarily (often daily) with Edens, and seldom spoke with Freed. Edens did regularly converse with Freed, whose office lay in between Edens's slightly bigger, grand piano–equipped office and a conference room for meetings.[30]

There is more to the story of Freed's early plans for the picture. His first choice of a screenwriter was Ben Feiner Jr., the older brother of Dorothy Feiner who wed Richard Rodgers in 1930. Feiner was hired in January 1949 to write a cinematic treatment (five pages of story, not a full script): an adaptation (under the new title *Singing in the Rain*) of John "Jack" McGowan's play *Excess Baggage*, which had been presented on Broadway in

1927 and on screen in 1928 (as noted in Table 13.2).[31] Both Feiner's outline and Comden and Green's narrative are set at a point in the 1920s that occurred slightly after the original stage play appeared: the transition to sound films. In Feiner's rewrite of MacGowan's story, a neophyte silent film actor becomes a major sound film star because she can sing. Comden and Green claimed ignorance of Feiner's work, insisting that they came up with the "overall idea" of setting the film in "the changeover period in Hollywood from the silents to the talkies."[32]

Comden and Green's assertion that they alone devised the idea of placing Freed's songs within a story set in the 1920s is questionable. *Singin'* was their fourth script for Freed, who exercised his option to renew their existing contract for two more years after the pair completed their first three pictures: *Good News* (1947, set in the 1920s), *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949, reuniting Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire), and *On the Town* (1949, an adaptation of Comden and Green's own 1944 Broadway musical).[33] The pair were hired by Freed in the first place because of their gift for witty stories about the 1920s, and only then got to create two subsequent scripts set in the recent past (*Barkleys* and *On the Town*). It seems just as likely that they knew Freed wanted them to write yet another story set in the 1920s, but that they resisted being typecast. In fact, Comden and Green refused to work on the project until a re-examination of their existing contract forced their hands.[34] "We didn't work for about six weeks," said Green in 2002, until "we knew we had no choice."[35] In 1972, the pair described this interval, probably more precisely, as "two war-torn weeks."[36]

To sum up what the archives reveal, the idea of placing Freed's songs within a story set in the 1920s just as moving pictures were beginning to talk occurred not only to Comden and Green but also to Freed, certainly at least eighteen months earlier. As he put it in an undated speech draft, he had a vision. " 'Singin' in the Rain' recalled to me the period when Herb Brown and I wrote the song. Hollywood 1928—the change over from silent to talkies—the all dimensional confusion. . . . The silent movie stars studying voice and diction."[37] Here we see Freed overtly assuming credit for the time, place, and some of the events in the script. When Comden and Green had finished a section of the screenplay, they would read it aloud to Freed for his approval.[38] The senior producer, in other words, had the first, interim, and final say on both the first script and the final cut for *Singin'*. Comden and Green's complicated negotiations with Freed suggest that collaboration is not always a benign process and that Freed respected his creative collaborators' autonomy only up to a point.

This new project already titled by Freed *Singing in the Rain* (changed later, for copyright reasons, to *Singin'*) followed on the heels of other films filled with recycled songs.[39] Over at Twentieth Century–Fox, Irving Berlin had developed the so-called cavalcade musical—often called jukebox musicals nowadays—in films like *Alexander's Ragtime Band* (1938), named after Berlin's first major hit published in 1911.[40] At Warner Bros., Doris Day and newcomer Danny Thomas were shooting *I'll See You in My Dreams* (1951), a fictionalized musical biography of the late Gus Kahn (1886–1941). MGM had produced cavalcade musicals built around the life and work of Jerome Kern (*Till the Clouds Roll By*, produced by Freed, 1946), Rodgers and Hart (*Words and Music*, produced by Freed, 1948), and Kalmar and Ruby (*Three Little Words*, featuring Debbie

Reynolds as singer Helen Kane, produced by Jack Cummings, 1950). Freed lured Berlin to MGM for the cavalcade musical *Easter Parade* (1948) starring Fred Astaire and Judy Garland, and worked with Ira Gershwin to create an elaborate tribute to his late brother George directed by Vincente Minnelli, *An American in Paris* (1951).

As co-director, choreographer, and performer rehearsing intensively with two colleagues he'd never worked with before (O'Connor and Reynolds), critiquing the script was just one of Kelly's responsibilities. He devised all the dance sequences, excepting O'Connor's famous solo "Make 'Em Laugh," which was sculpted out of O'Connor's improvisations in rehearsals.[41] Co-director Stanley Donen, cinematographer Harold Rosson (1895–1988), and post-production editor Adrienne Fazan (1906–1986) executed Kelly's ideas, no doubt with their own embellishments. Their work was matched with Hayton's musical arrangements, with fine sound adjustments overseen by former concert pianist Lela Simone (1907–1991), the uncredited music coordinator for the picture.[42]

Some striking images in the film prefigure Donen's visual innovations as a solo director of films like *Funny Face* (1957). Lina's appearance after Kathy throws a cake at Don but hits Lina by mistake resembles that of a 1950s-era science-fiction monster with groping human hands, staring directly at the viewer with eyes buried within a despoiled visage conveying not anger but grief (see Figure 13.2). As O'Connor later observed, this was Hagen's first comic role, and she approached it "as an actress would," inhabiting the character rather than creating a parody of a "ditsy blonde."[43]

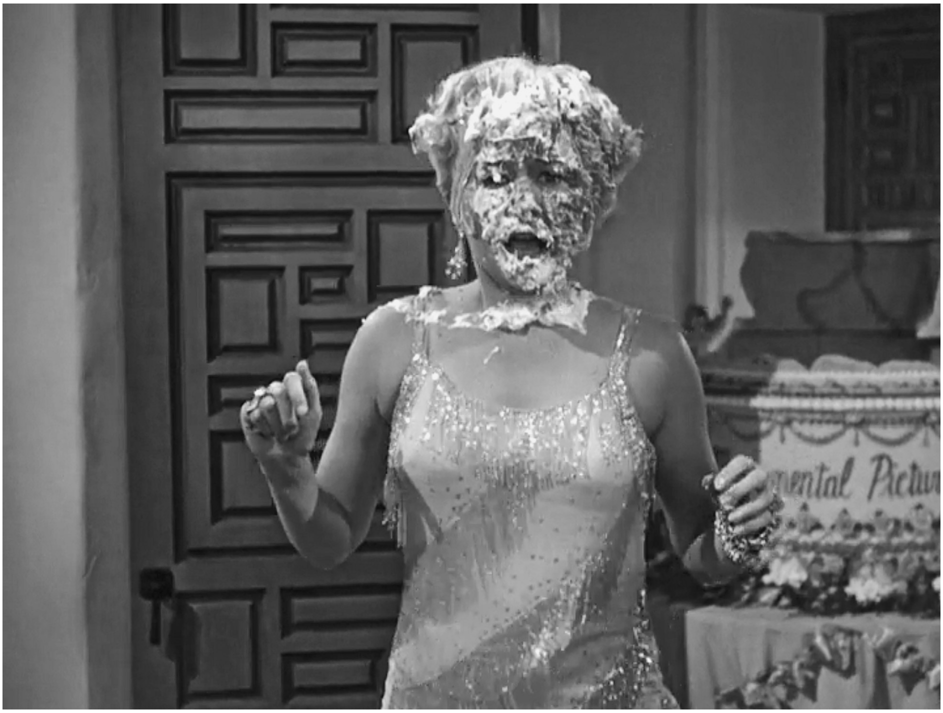


FIGURE 13.2 Lina Lamont, played by Jean Hagen, disfigured by cake icing in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). Source: *Singin' in the Rain* (Turner Entertainment Co., 2002 [2-DVD set]), 24:49.

Dialogue rehearsals and extensive dance rehearsals before and during production were an essential element in Kelly's creative process, leading to ideas for streamlining and strengthening the script as a whole. Comden and Green were theater folk themselves and would be uncommonly open to revisions arising in just this way. They were musical dramatists who served particular performers, not the other way around. Their scripts for both the stage and screen versions of *On the Town* created logical and smooth transitions between action, comic dialogue, and song and dance within a story observing Aristotelian unities of time and place and a common narrative thread: each of the three sailors hopes to find romance during their one day in New York City. But the central gimmick of the plot is one common to comedies of the 1930s: a case of mistaken identity (Miss Turnstiles is not the celebrity Gabey thinks she is, but a struggling performer from—in an incredible coincidence—the same small town in Indiana as Gabey).

*Singin' in the Rain* follows a much stronger narrative thread by setting Lina up as a beautiful star determined to stay at the top, but handicapped by her lack of acting ability. The plot proceeds by first trying to work around her vocal weaknesses, then exposing them when she refuses to give Kathy credit. This is truly a fairy tale ending, since filmmakers have often managed to work creatively around the performative deficiencies of a given star, sometimes over a long career. For example, ironically it was Gene Kelly whose singing never really measured up to peers like Howard Keel or Frank Sinatra. Sinatra costarred with Kelly in *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* (1949) and *On the Town*.

While *Singin'* was in production, anxieties about the ending must have sparked the covert hiring of a ghost writer, Joseph Fields, who went on to write the script for the film version of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, among many other films. Fields spent a day (July 26, 1951) producing a revised finale. In Fields's rejected rewrite, Don swings on ropes and struggles with a stagehand for access to the curtain controls, which are electrified and controlled by big buttons. It was perhaps an attempt to build on Kelly's swashbuckling swings and jumps in Don's silent action scenes, some of which were borrowed from his earlier film *The Pirate* (1948). Ultimately, Kelly, Comden, and Green just artfully tweaked the ending of the April 11, 1951, "Okay Script."[44] A projected final trio version of "You Are My Lucky Star" (with Cosmo joining in) was rejected in favor of the brief duet version and the billboard scene. The only manuscript draft material for that final version of the film's ending—a couple kissing before a billboard also featuring their images—is an undated typescript page ending Comden's palimpsest manuscript preserved in New York.[45]

The billboard scene is, of course, also included in the ex post facto cutting continuity script nominally dated March 17, 1952. Presumably a working copy of the continuity script must have been available by late November when shooting ended, for use by the post-production crews.[46] An image of Don and Lina together on a fan magazine cover appears in the opening scene; the billboard with Don and Kathy on it is a varied bookend to the earlier image. Complementary images of a series of billboards of Don and Lina in their series of hit films were excised in Freed's last round of cuts (refer back to Table 13.3).

An amped-up version of Don's early career as a stuntman was added on July 20, 1951. The slapstick-style pratfalls Comden and Green wrote up were replaced with cinematic spectacles: Don runs a motorcycle off a cliff, taxis a biplane into a chicken house, and runs into a Civil War munitions dump just before it explodes.

It appears that while the narrative arc was Comden and Green's invention, many of the integrations between story, dance, and music that Basinger and many others have found so distinctive about *Singin'* were suggested by Kelly. It also seems that once Kelly joined the project, Comden and Green's reluctant return to writing yet another story set in the 1920s became a team effort akin to the film version of *On the Town*. The first and last phases of the script's development are both uniquely difficult to document yet particularly interesting and shed a special light on the compositional process, further illuminating Kelly and Freed's important roles.[47] In another example of conflicting memories, in interviews Comden and Green insisted they weren't sure whether Kelly would join the project. Donen, on the other hand, has stated that Kelly was committed from the get-go.[48]

What is truly remarkable about the metamorphosis from first script to final cut is not the various reasons usually given for why adjustments were made. Certainly casting decisions made some changes logical. Comden and Green's absence left the control of the script in Kelly's hands during production. Kelly's habit of intensive rehearsals meant that dramaturgical issues as well as choreographic problems were addressed as the production progressed. Kelly had the star clout to get what he wanted, and Freed still had the wherewithal to provide the resources, even as the studios were desperately facing the specter of competition from television. The inclusion of the dream ballet justified major and minor cuts at the eleventh hour. But these circumstances are a part of the story of every complex theatrical or cinematic production and seldom lead to consistent improvements in the finished product.

What is almost miraculous is the logical, elaborate, seamless merger of drama with music achieved with what began as a thematically ambitious but characteristically episodic and talky Comden and Green script. It is this seamless *découpage classique* that so impressed *Nouvelle Vague* critics and directors like François Truffaut and continues to stand out to contemporary critics and scholars like Basinger and Cohan, quoted at the outset of this chapter. Kelly and Freed's narrative strategies involved sacrificing much witty repartée, simplifying the backstories and motivations of the major characters, and ruthlessly cutting down most subsidiary roles. But how did they compensate for what remains, perhaps, the film's greatest weakness, its songs?

The truly mysterious part is how Kelly, Donen, and perhaps Edens devised ways of placing Freed and Brown's situational, somewhat superficial songs, one after the other, into such plausible, satisfying dramaturgical contexts. After summarizing the first appearances of the song "Singin' in the Rain" in *Hollywood Revue* (1929), critic Ethan Mordden marveled at "how much more the studio got out of the same number in *Singin' in the Rain* . . . there the song reveals how Gene Kelly's character feels about life . . . what an enlightened heart looks like."[49] Indeed, the film took songs that delivered "what Hollywood wanted (which was songs created to appeal to a very wide public)" and put them to the uses that "Broadway wanted . . . songs engrossed in the development of plot and character."[50]

Certainly Comden and Green deserve two lion's shares of the credit for the story's formal coherence and historical heft. Even in early drafts, the narrative is carefully rounded out. Two gala movie premieres narrated by Dora the gossip columnist serve as bookends, just as scenes shot at dawn on a real Brooklyn Navy Yard pier with the towers of Manhattan in the background across the East River begin and end *On the Town*. The finished picture preserves this structure but alters it. It begins with the *entrance* of stars *before* a movie premiere, and ends with those stars appearing *after* another premiere. Another scene in early drafts of the ending is cut. Originally *two* married couples arrive at the last film premiere hosted by Dora: Don and Kathy, and (in a novel twist) Cosmo and Lina, now appearing in " 'The Jungle Princess,' in which she doesn't say a word—she just grunts!"[51] Another felicitous aspect of the final cut of *Singin' in the Rain* is how few moments of dated language or attitudes like this questionable reference to a grunting denizen of the jungle survived. Freed and Brown's song "Chant of the Jungle" also mercifully disappeared. This has helped extend the work's life into the twenty-first century, although some critics have come to question "the abjection of Lina Lamont" at the heart of the narrative.[52]

The organizing and reorganizing of the palimpsest script may have ended with Comden and Green's published version of the screenplay in 1972. But, as we have seen, their account of the script's genesis in the foreword and elsewhere is incomplete and inaccurate. The bullets below tally up the substantive differences between the October 1950 "Temporary Complete" script and the finished film.

- The opening scene of a movie premiere is moved from the Egyptian to the more spectacular Chinese Theater.
- Extraneous dialogue is cut repeatedly and subsidiary characters (especially Dora Bailey and Zelda Zanders) are cut down.
- The romance between Don and Kathy is concentrated into one rebuilt music and dance number, "You Were Meant for Me." Two additional framing solos, one for each, are shot but cut at the last minute.
- "Singin' in the Rain" as a trio is replaced by "Good Morning."
- The setting for the title song is rewritten as a solo scene for Don.
- The *Broadway Ballet* is added in a penultimate position and a "BIG MUSICAL NUMBER—FINALE" in earlier scripts, never planned out, is cut in favor of a brief reprise of "Singin' in the Rain" and "You Are My Lucky Star." After Kathy's solo version is cut, this song is no longer an obvious reprise, but the melody is still foreshadowed in the underscoring accompanying the film's opening credits.
- The ending is reworked. It's set in a bigger theater than in earlier scripts. Cosmo and Dora's roles in the sequence are reduced. A dénouement revealing that time has passed and a double wedding has taken place in the meantime is cut, and the billboard scene is added. Although some previous scenes featuring billboards are cut,

> the billboard image is firmly integrated visually as the camera pulls back to include Don and Kathy in real life, standing much as they do in the advertisement.

To sum up the arguments for Kelly as coauthor (or, in Hess and Dabholkar's more measured assessment, "a driving force") and Freed as accommodating but influential impresario: Kelly thought long and hard about how to integrate movement and sound into a convincing, coherent narrative and passed on these ideas.[53] Comden and Green assented at a minimum over long-distance telephone. They also frequently wrote the new ideas up, even when they were distracted by their new Broadway venture. Freed deserves two kinds of credit. He stepped back and came up with the money when someone else on the film's creative team felt strongly about something. For example, he acceded to Kelly's determination to replace Levant with O'Connor, to Edens's and costume designer Walter Plunkett's idea for a fashion show, and to Kelly's request to bring in Charisse and shoot a hugely expensive dream ballet.

But Freed also exercised his power. Here are a few examples: (1) Freed's initial vision of a story set in the 1920s during the transition from silent to sound movies was realized by Comden and Green; (2) Freed's song catalogue was extensively represented, at his insistence and over Comden and Green's strenuous objections; (3) Freed suggested "a number of changes" to the script in March 1951 (documented in a letter from agent Irving "Swifty" Lazar to his clients Comden and Green); and (4) Freed approved the extensive list detailed in Table 13.2 of big and small cuts to the picture after previews. By shortening the film to a trim hour and a half (if one sets the dream ballet aside as a digressive if highly entertaining intermezzo), Freed improved it substantially.

Consider that there is no "director's cut" version of the film, despite the possible commercial opportunities such an altered re-release might represent. Some of the footage was lost, to be sure, and outtakes and those cut scenes still preserved are now available on double DVD sets as extras. But Freed's trimmed version of Comden and Green's narrative framing Kelly's pleasingly varied series of music and dance numbers has worn well as is. Had not Kelly's *Broadway Ballet* expanded to such length, such vigorous pruning might not have been done, and the film as a whole would have suffered—another reason to treasure the dream ballet, which is sometimes faulted despite its links, via connecting scenes before and after with R.F., to Don's opening autobiography, which similarly contrasts words and images to create both comic and dramatic effects.[54]

* * *

The critical literature around *Singin' in the Rain* has grown in recent decades. *Singin'* was the subject of an entire scholarly conference held in Salzburg, Austria, in 2013 and a consequent scholarly anthology.[55] In 1992, Peter Wollen plausibly discerned elements of all three of Rick Altman's hypothetical genre categories in the film: fairy tale, show, and folk musicals.[56] Like the little mermaid, Kathy loses her voice to a wicked woman, until the tables are turned at the very end of the film. Like Cinderella, as the tale ends she is transformed into a form of royalty: a movie star. A work of art (a show musical) is also being recreated within the film: a silent picture show reborn as the talking picture *The*

*Dancing Cavalier.* Like a folktale, the story is set in "a mythicized version of the cultural past."[57]

But perfection in form and theme is not the same as perfection in content. Basinger is one thoughtful contemporary critic who thinks *Singin'* may be popular but overrated: "safe" and "simple." Like so many cultural monuments of the 1950s, the film reinforces rather than challenges cultural norms, seeking to entertain rather than enlighten. Nevertheless, the film's witty dialogue, memorable performances, lush production, relatively naturalistic cinematography (given the unavoidable limitations of slow film and backlot settings), inventive choreography, clear construction, and thematic depth combine to make it, at present, that reigning cultural "yardstick" Basinger extolled. Like *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Casablanca* (1942), *Singin' in the Rain* has also benefited from its cultural propinquity, sparking remixes as recent as a lively 2020 Burberry raincoat commercial, references in other films from *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) to *La La Land* (2016), and even a controversial 2005 Volkswagen ad that prompted some thoughtful scholarship on simulation and homage.[58]

## NOTES

1. Jeanine Basinger, *The Movie Musical!* (New York: Knopf, 2019), 440.
2. This amount included royalties on other songs including the hit "Pagan Love Song" (1930). Hugh Fordin, *M-G-M's Greatest Musicals: The Arthur Freed Unit* (Boston: Da Capo Press 1996 [repr. of New York: Doubleday, 1975; 1st ed. titled *The World of Entertainment! Hollywood's Greatest Musicals*]), 350.
3. Fordin, *M-G-M's Greatest Musicals*, 558–562.
4. Donald Bogle, *Bright Boulevards, Bold Dreams* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), 319.
5. Fordin, *M-G-M's Greatest Musicals*, 328.
6. Fordin, *M-G-M's Greatest Musicals*, 359 and 362.
7. Jean Hagen (who played Lina Lamont) was nominated for Actress in a Supporting Role and Lennie Hayton was nominated for Music (Scoring of a Musical Picture).
8. Steven Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 200.
9. William Baer, *Classic American Films: Conversations with the Screenwriters* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), 3. This interview was first published in *Michigan Quarterly Review* 41, no. 1 (2002): 3.
10. Gene Kelly, speech at AFI Lifetime Achievement Award Ceremony (television broadcast), 1985.
11. Many thanks to reviewers Geoffrey Block, Dominic Broomfield-McHugh, and Anonymous, and to staff at NYPL (Diana Bertolini, Doug Reside, et al), USC (Ned Comstock), and AMPAS (Matt Severson, et al).
12. Basinger, *The Movie Musical!*, 444.
13. Betty Comden and Adolph Green, *The Band Wagon* (London: Lorrimer, 1986), 22.
14. Fordin, *M-G-M's Greatest Musicals*, 357.
15. See "Singin' in the rain: featured in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Hollywood revue of 1929," sheet music, AMPAS Margaret Herrick Library Digital Collections online.

16. Regarding Edens and Donen's early participation and Harlow and Gilbert as inspirations, see Fordin, *M-G-M's Greatest Musicals*, 352–353; Betty Comden and Adolph Green, *Singin' in the Rain: Story and Screenplay*, introduction by the authors (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 5; and Baer, *Classic American Films*, 6.
17. Rudy Behlmer, *Behind the Scenes: The Making of . . .* (Hollywood and New York: Samuel French, 1990 [1982]), 259–260.
18. Between April 2 and May 31, 1951. See Singin' in the Rain [Assistant Director's reports], 1951 April 2–1952 Jan 10, Arthur Freed Papers, Box 22, Folder 11, USC.
19. Fordin, *M-G-M's Greatest Musicals*, 358.
20. Earl J. Hess and Pratibha A. Dabholkar, *Singin' in the Rain: The Making of an American Masterpiece* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 179. Fordin gives the date of the premiere as April 10. Fordin, *M-G-M's Greatest Musicals*, 362.
21. Singin' in the Rain [Assistant Director's reports], 1951 April 2–1952 Jan 10, Arthur Freed Papers, Box 22, Folder 11, USC.
22. "Okay script" with manuscript and typed revisions, New York Public Library, Comden & Green Papers, Box 9, Folder 7.
23. "Eliminations made from Singing in the rain," with a cover memo from J. J. Cohn to Freed and Donen dated April 11, 1952, Arthur Freed Papers, Box 23, Folder 1, USC.
24. Both outtakes can be heard on the 2-CD release *Singin' in the Rain*, original motion picture soundtrack, the deluxe 50th anniversary edition, produced by George Feltenstein, Turner/Rhino 2002, R2 74497.
25. Comden and Green, "OK" Script, NYPL, Comden Papers, Box 12, Folder 11, 37.
26. MGM script 2642-f.1234 1950.08.10–09.14, 37, Turner/MGM Script Collection, AMPAS.
27. Comden and Green, "OK" Script, NYPL, Comden Papers, Box 12, Folder 11, 12.
28. Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment*, 208–209.
29. Comden and Green, "OK" Script, NYPL, Comden Papers, Box 12, Folder 11, 27.
30. See the floor plan and photo reproduced in Fordin, *MGM's Greatest Musicals*, 120.
31. Ben Feiner Jr., "Original Singing in the Rain-Cp rough draft of story outline from Ben Feiner, Jr.," January 28, 1949, 2642-f.S-1233, Turner/MGM Script Collection, AMPAS.
32. Baer, *Classic American Films*, 4.
33. See Dominic Broomfield-McHugh's chapter in this collection on *The Barkleys of Broadway*. When Comden and Green completed their first three-year contract on November 16, 1951, the studio picked up a two-year option extending that agreement to July 19, 1953. For each film under this contract they were each paid $1,750 a week for a guaranteed forty weeks, divided into two twenty-week "employment periods" (i.e., $70,000 each in 1952, equivalent to about $700,000 today). They were each paid a $15,000 bonus for creating an original story for *Singin'*. See Freed Papers, Box 23, Folder 3, USC, for copies of relevant memos.
34. Under their contract with MGM, they also had a financial incentive for taking this stance. If they wrote ALL the lyrics for a film they each got an additional $25,000, plus royalties. See Freed Papers, Box 23, Folder 3, USC.
35. Baer, *Classic American Films*, 4–5.
36. Comden and Green, *Singin' in the Rain* (1972), 3. The writers received their regular weekly pay throughout this *contretemps*; see Table 13.3.
37. "Singin' promotion and publicity," Freed Papers, Box 23, Folder 4, USC. The date and location for the intended speech is unknown.
38. Comden and Green, *Singin' in the Rain*, 8.
39. Hess and Dabholkar, *Singin' in the Rain*, 13, 62, and 278n20.

40. Jeffrey Magee illustrated how Berlin devised the cavalcade genre during his March 26, 2009, talk at the Library of Congress.
41. Hess and Dabholkar, *Singin' in the Rain*, 94–99.
42. Hess and Dabholkar, *Singin' in the Rain*, 152–153.
43. *Singin' in the Rain*, audio commentary by Donald O'Connor (2-DVD release, 2002 [1952]), 10:00.
44. See Turner/MGM scripts, folder S-1240, AMPAS.
45. "OK" script, Comden & Green Papers, Box 9, Folder 7, NYPL.
46. "OK" script, Comden and Green Papers, Box 9, Folder 7, NYPL.
47. Hess and Dabholkar, *Singin' in the Rain*, 21–26 and 57–65.
48. Hess and Dabholkar, *Singin' in the Rain*, 27.
49. Ethan Mordden, *When Broadway Went to Hollywood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 21.
50. Mordden, *When Broadway Went to Hollywood*, 21.
51. MGM script 2642-f.1234 1950.08.10–09.14, 88, AMPAS.
52. Alan Nadel, *Demographic Angst: Cultural Narrative and American Films of the 1950s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 32.
53. Hess and Dabholkar, *Singin' in the Rain*, 28, 58, and 64–65.
54. Wollen offers a spirited defense of the ballet, comparing it in quality to the ballet in *The Red Shoes* (1949) and invoking works by Chaucer, Boccaccio, Cervantes, and Melville as comparably digressive yet linked. Peter Wollen (1992), *Singin' in the Rain* (BFI Film Classics Series), 59.
55. Joachim Brügge and Nils Grosch, eds., "*Singin' in the Rain*": *Kulturgeschichte eines Hollywood-Musical-Klassikers* (Münster and New York: Waxmann, 2014).
56. Wollen, *Singin' in the Rain*, 54–55. Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press and BFI Publishing, 1989), 272.
57. Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 272; quoted in Wollen, *Singin' in the Rain*, 55.
58. See Mary Fogarty, "Gene Kelly: The Original, Updated," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen,* edited by Melissa Blanco Borelli (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 83–96.

## CHAPTER 14

# *NIGHT AND DAY*, THE MUSICAL

### CLIFF EISEN

The late 1930s and early 1940s witnessed an upsurge in historical biopics, sometimes based on European figures such as Marie Antoinette and Marie Curie, but more often than not based on the lives of Americans, including cowboys and frontiersmen, politicians and military figures, inventors, writers, athletes and criminals, including Wyatt Earp, Jesse James, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Alva Edison, Edgar Allan Poe, Lou Gehrig, and John Dillinger, among others.[1] By the mid-1940s, however, it was living figures who commanded the most attention; as Bosley Crowther pointed out in the *New York Times*, "This trend toward the 'living biography' has been encouraged, in part, by the wealth of personality stories which have come out of the war" and by the numerous articles in the press that "have provided a new source of legend."[2] He cites in particular *Mission to Moscow*, featuring Churchill and Stalin; *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*, an account of America's first retaliatory air strike against Japan; and *Pride of the Marines*, with John Garfield as Sergeant Al Schmid, hero of Guadalcanal.[3]

At the end of the war, some cultural figures, especially composers whose works were seen as particularly American and that could contribute to global American cultural hegemony in a postwar world, were featured as well. In 1945 and 1946, three such pictures were released: *Rhapsody in Blue*, a Gershwin film featuring Robert Alda as the composer; *Night and Day*, a life of Cole Porter starring Cary Grant; and *Till the Clouds Roll By*, a biopic of Jerome Kern starring Robert Walker.[4] To be sure, Gershwin had died in 1937; nevertheless, his music continued to be recognized as quintessentially American, fitting the times.

All three films had mixed reviews. *Harrison's Reports*, a New York movie-trade journal, described *Rhapsody in Blue* as "an inspiring, heart-warming story," while *Life* considered it "one of the most lavishly tuneful musical films ever produced."[5] *Till the Clouds Roll By* gained kudos for being "an appealing love story" and an 'outstanding achievement."[6] As for *Night and Day*, *Variety* described the film as "a smash. It will mop up from New England to New Zealand. It has everything"—a fair enough assessment since it ended the year as the fourteenth-highest grossing film of 1946[7]—while a critic in the *New York Herald Tribune* wrote that "Cole Porter . . . has been accorded a splendidly restrained accolade . . . 'Night and Day' is a gala tune-fest."[8] Crowther, however, panned *Rhapsody in Blue*, writing that "they [Warner Bros.] have laid out a standard biography of a music-loving East Side kid who vaults to success as a popular tunesmith, has moderate yearnings to do serious work, wishy-washes for female affection and dies an untimely death." And with respect to *Till the Clouds Roll By*, he wondered, "Why did Metro, for instance, have to cook up a thoroughly phoney yarn about the struggles of a chirpy young composer to carry the lovely songs of Jerry Kern? And why did it have to do it in such a hackneyed and sentimental way as to grate on the sensibilities of even the most affectionately disposed?"[9]

*Night and Day* fared no better, perhaps even worse. The subtitle of a review published in *Life* was "Film about Composer Cole Porter Is an Exemplar of What's Wrong with Hollywood Musicals,"[10] while John McCarten, writing in the *New Yorker*, dismissed it as a travesty:

> Fairly early in "Night and Day," there is a scene in which we discover Cary Grant sitting moodily at a grand piano in a room not much smaller than Carnegie Hall and designed to represent a nook in an Indiana homestead. Rolling his eyes around this plushy interior, Mr. Grant presently lets his glance rest on an elegant grandfather's clock. "Loike," he says in an accent that sounds singularly remote from the Middle West, "the tick, tick, tock of the stitely clock," and before you know it, he has put together the words and music of Cole Porter's most popular song. . . . I know nothing about Cole Porter except that he has written some damned good songs, but I very much doubt that his life has been as exceedingly dull as it is made out to be in "Night and Day." According to the plot, Mr. Porter started out with thousands of dollars and a talent for writing music, and wound up with millions of dollars and his talent unimpaired. The fact that his legs were injured in an accident is hardly as dramatic as Beethoven's deafness, but the Warner Brothers seem to think it is. I never expected to see another biographical film quite as dismal as the one the Brothers produced about George Gershwin, but this hash of Mr. Porter's career makes the Gershwin epic seem, in retrospect, a dazzler.[11]

These criticisms of *Rhapsody in Blue*, *Night and Day*, and *Till the Clouds Roll By* are a real-time adumbration of what has come to be seen as the recurring narrative of biopics of American composers in particular: a young ambitious artist is torn between his "American" voice (representing authenticity, although he may not recognize it as such, at least at first) and European classical music (representing high culture, prestige, and the establishment); he falls in love with, and is loved by, a sympathetic woman who supports him and inspires him; and in the end he fulfills his native genius.[12] Broadly speaking, this is the narrative of both the Gershwin and Kern films: Gershwin studies with Professor Otto Franck, a student of Brahms, while Kern is taken under the wing of the arranger Frank Sadler, who aspires to compose a symphony (early on he says to Kern, "The problem with you songwriters is that you never think of doing anything big, anything worthwhile like Brahms. . . . Did you ever hear Beethoven's Eroica or Mozart's Jupiter?"); both are encouraged to find their "native" voices; both have central love stories though Gershwin's, unlike Kern's, is unsuccessful; and both succeed with "great" works that bridge the divide between the old and new, the voices of a European "past" and an authentic American present: *Show Boat* for Kern (the film opens with an extended sequence of stagings from the show) and *Rhapsody in Blue*, *An American in Paris*, and the *Concerto in F* for Gershwin.[13]

*Night and Day* includes some of this paradigm: it includes the "love of a good woman"—his wife Linda Lee Thomas—and a scene where she seemingly inspires the "great" song, "Night and Day," not coincidentally the title of the film. And John Tibbetts suggests that there is an occasional attempt to wed the idea of the redeeming wife with an authentic, modern American voice: "When Porter disdains the 'people's music'—'I'm fed up with the riverboats, honky-tonks, and music counters'—his wife deserts him, his friends disappear, and he suffers a terrible riding accident. Later, suffering brings him enlightenment, and, after writing 'Don't Fence Me In' for Roy Rogers, he returns to 'hearth, home, and songwriting.' "[14] With his affluent Midwest upbringing, however, Porter does not share Gershwin's and Kern's modest origin stories, and the film pointedly does away with showing Porter trained in the Western European classical tradition (ironically, since he studied at the Schola Cantorum in Paris and had at least considered composition lessons with Igor Stravinsky).[15] In the end, Porter does not find an authentic "American" voice, because he always had one, even if it may not always have been successful.

The fact that studios and composers insisted on or accepted narratives that depart from the facts of composers' lives makes the question of biopics' verisimilitude moot—Porter's contract for *Night and Day* explicitly states that "it is understood that Producers in the development of the story . . . upon which the photoplay shall be based shall be free to dramatize, fictionalize, or emphasize any or all incidents in the life of the Seller or interpolate such incidents as Producers may deem necessary in order to obtain a treatment of continuity of commercial value"[16]—even if biographical accuracy continues to be a recent, critical concern.[17] And it obscures critical inquiry simply to accept the common generic designation "biopic" regardless of a film's adherence or non-adherence to "facts." In the case of *Night and Day*, it may be worth asking whether generic categories adequately account for the specifics and seeming point of the film. An otherwise apparently unknown early treatment of the *Night and Day* script together with imagery from the show's lobby cards, as well as the finished film itself, suggest that *Night and Day* is primarily a good old-fashioned romance that in its relationship to Porter's music most closely approximates a jukebox musical.

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According to George Eells,[18] it was Irving Berlin who first proposed the idea of a Porter biopic to Jack Warner—probably, if this is true, in late 1942 or early 1943. In any event, Warner met with Porter in the second week of May 1943 and subsequently sent him a telegram on May 15: "Dear Cole: After our very lovely luncheon talk the other day I was sure that we would be able to get together and quickly close the deal on the screening of your life, using your great numbers and three or four new ones for what I am sure would make a great film."

A deal was struck by early August[19] and a contract signed on December 29; according to its terms, Porter was to receive $300,000 (10% of which went to his Hollywood agent, Arthur Lyons) for thirty-five songs.[20] The suggested title for the film was *Cavalcade*,[21] and while Porter had insisted all along that he would not sell his life story cheaply, he was at the same time worried about possible tax implications of such a large fee, writing to his friend Sam Stark on January 4, 1944: "I am going to see my lawyer when I get back to New York to find out whether I can afford to do another picture beside the Warner Bros. NIGHT and DAY. I am in a curious quandary. I have been notified that my March taxes will be so big that it leaves me with no money to live on, therefore, it would be nice to have money coming in from another picture, but if I take this second picture, then the income tax would be so big that I won't even have enough money to pay for a roof over my head."

An early treatment of the story, now at the Cole Porter Literary and Musical Property Trusts, probably dates from about this time. Though markedly different from the finished script, it nevertheless lays out several narratives that have their counterparts in other composer biopics and in the final version of *Night and Day*. The plot moves quickly through Porter's college days at Yale, youthful inklings of his musical talent and aspirations, a Christmas back in his hometown of Peru, Indiana, where he meets Linda, his future wife, his service in World War I, and a succession of scenes in which Porter suffers failure and, eventually, success. As in the released film, Porter becomes estranged from Linda though—of course—they reconcile in the end. The prominence of this plot line has some resonance with *Rhapsody in Blue*. But whereas Gershwin loses his "true love" through his obsession with his art, Porter recovers his, almost at the expense of his art. Porter and Linda, the lovers, overwhelm the story of Porter the composer.

The draft treatment includes several notations by Porter that could be read as unconsciously revealing of his contradictory character, stand-offish and business-like professionally, warm and outgoing with his intimate friends, and patronizing with his younger lovers. Several of his remarks are pedantic corrections of fact (the provisions of the contract notwithstanding) and are irrelevant, or largely irrelevant, to the plot or the scenography. In one scene, when the Yale students are leaving campus for the Christmas holidays, Porter is at pains to point out that they departed from the "old station" in New Haven; in another he notes that the Porter family home was not actually *in* Peru, but a farm outside town. He objects, too, to the description of Linda as the "daughter of another native Indiana family," noting in the margin that she is from Kentucky.[22] In a scene set during World War I, as troops prepare for battle, the treatment calls for troops made up of "American doughboys, Zouave warriors from Algeria, French artillery units, and English Tommies. The Zouaves, in their vivid oriental battle dress are the most spectacular of the troops, and behind the rhythm of their marching we catch the first tom-tom beats of what Cole will later develop into 'Begin the Beguine.' " In the margin, Porter writes "Spahis Senegalese."[23] He does not, however, correct any of the larger misrepresentations about his early career, how in Paris he met and wooed Linda, a rich divorcee, the *mises-en-scène* that do not correspond with the times or places where some of the depicted events actually took place or, understandably, the suppression of his homosexuality.

The draft also includes suggestions by Porter for songs and performers to be used in the film in specific situations. In a scene set in a Parisian cabaret, the character Porter meets Mistinguette,[24] who is to sing "You've Got That Thing," but Porter himself suggests instead either Irene Bordoni or Maurice Chavalier, both of whom, unlike Mistinguette, he was friendly with.[25] He objects to having "Miss Otis Regrets" as the first song in the film: set during Porter's early law studies, Miss Otis is the name of a dog who is the pretend defendant in a mock trial. And he suggests "I'm in Love Again" to replace "You Do Something to Me" in a scene where Porter and Linda are on a Seine River cruise during his wartime convalescence (a first iteration of the later, well-known scene where Porter, again convalescing from war injuries, is interrupted in his musical meditations by Linda, who sits with him and "inspires" "Night and Day"). The most Freudian example perhaps—readable as representing *ego* and *id*—is a scene where Porter thinks of a song that is "just right" for his college days, potential flame Gracie Harris. The treatment suggests the straightforward, and in the context benign, "Where Have You Been" (from *The New Yorkers*, 1930), while Porter suggests either "You Do Something to Me" or "Find Me a Primitive Man" (both from *Fifty Million Frenchmen*, 1929; see Figures 14.1a and 14.1b).

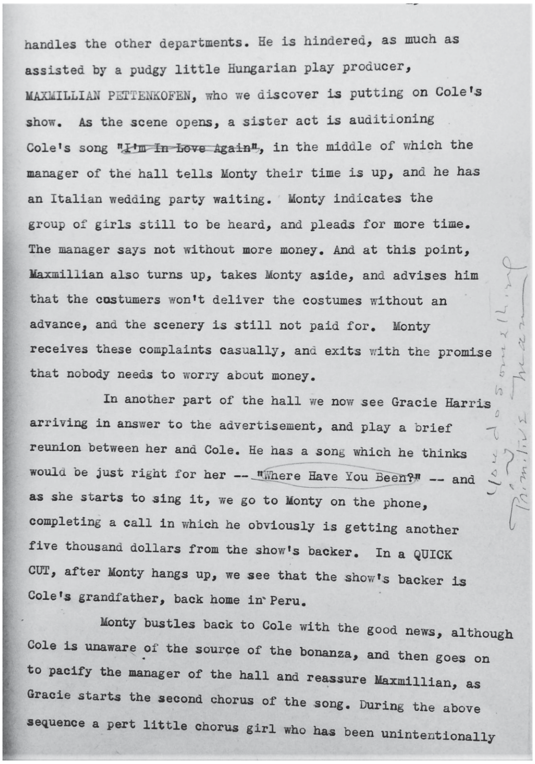
You do something to me
Something that simply mystifies me
Tell me, why should it be
You have the power to hypnotize me
Let me live 'neath your spell
You do that voodoo that you do so well
For you do something to me
That nobody else could do.

Find me a primitive man,
Built on a primitive plan.
Someone with vigor and vim.
I don't mean a kind that belongs to a club,
But the kind that has a club that belongs to him.
I could be the personal slave
Of someone just out of a cave.

The real importance of the early treatment, however, is that it provides a baseline for understanding how the script was eventually changed in response to perceptions of its shortcomings and how some of its basic ideas nevertheless continued to inform the film and, in some ways, to distinguish it from *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Till the Clouds Roll By*.

Porter was sent a working script at the start of 1944, which he acknowledged on February 17; later the same day he received a telegram from Cary Grant, his preferred actor to play the Porter character in the film. Grant's telegram is lost but Porter reproduced its contents in a telegram to Hal Wallis, a production manager at Warner Bros.: "Dear Hal. Following wire just arrived: 'Dear Cole, desire assure you of no intention offend by not answering your letter as I immediately contacted Warner with object reading script of Night and Day then meeting with my manager to discuss possibility of making picture so could write you more fully rather than answer merely expressing wish

(a)



handles the other departments. He is hindered, as much as assisted by a pudgy little Hungarian play producer, MAXMILLIAN PETTENKOFEN, who we discover is putting on Cole's show. As the scene opens, a sister act is auditioning Cole's song ~~"I'm In Love Again"~~, in the middle of which the manager of the hall tells Monty their time is up, and he has an Italian wedding party waiting. Monty indicates the group of girls still to be heard, and pleads for more time. The manager says not without more money. And at this point, Maxmillian also turns up, takes Monty aside, and advises him that the costumers won't deliver the costumes without an advance, and the scenery is still not paid for. Monty receives these complaints casually, and exits with the promise that nobody needs to worry about money.

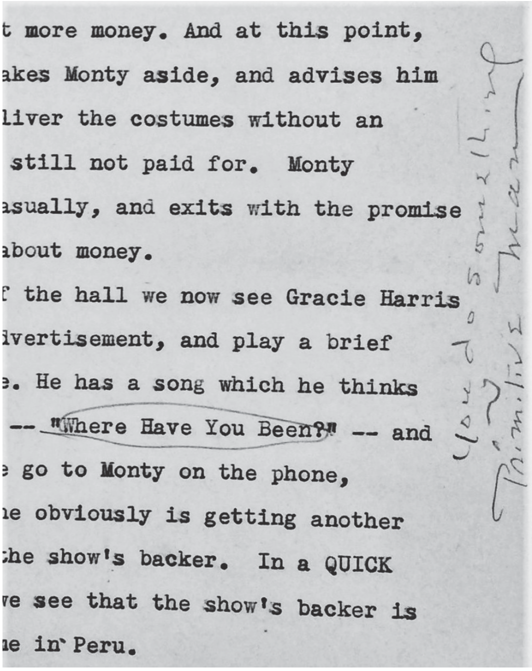
In another part of the hall we now see Gracie Harris arriving in answer to the advertisement, and play a brief reunion between her and Cole. He has a song which he thinks would be just right for her -- "Where Have You Been?" -- and as she starts to sing it, we go to Monty on the phone, completing a call in which he obviously is getting another five thousand dollars from the show's backer. In a QUICK CUT, after Monty hangs up, we see that the show's backer is Cole's grandfather, back home in Peru.

Monty bustles back to Cole with the good news, although Cole is unaware of the source of the bonanza, and then goes on to pacify the manager of the hall and reassure Maxmillian, as Gracie starts the second chorus of the song. During the above sequence a pert little chorus girl who has been unintentionally

You do something
Primitive mean

**FIGURE 14.1A** *Night and Day*, draft treatment, 13. (The Cole Porter Musical & Literary Property Trusts. Used with Permission.)

(b)



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still not paid for. Monty
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dvertisement, and play a brief
e. He has a song which he thinks
-- "Where Have You Been?" -- and
e go to Monty on the phone,
he obviously is getting another
the show's backer. In a QUICK
we see that the show's backer is
ne in Peru.

You do something
Primitive mean

**FIGURE 14.1B** *Night and Day*, draft treatment, 13. (The Cole Porter Musical & Literary Property Trusts. Used with Permission.)

to comply your flattering suggestion that I play the role. However script did not reach me until last week although previous commitments now make my availability doubtful. I thought you might like knowing that I consider it one of the finest scripts I've read, but then its [*sic*] about one of the finest people I've known.' "[26]

In the end, Grant took the role, with Alexis Smith playing Linda Porter. But Arthur Schwartz, the film's producer, considered the script weak and on April 13, 1944, he wrote to Jack Warner with numerous suggestions for its improvement: more substantial roles for Porter's friend Monty Woolley, his important social contacts such as Elsa Maxwell and the London impresario Charles Cochran, as well as appearances by some of the stars who had made Porter's songs famous and who were on intimate terms with the composer, including Fred Astaire, Jimmy Durante, Fred Waring, Gertrude Lawrence, Victor Moore, Bob Hope, Ethel Merman, and Mary Martin. Finally, Schwartz wanted to find a way to relieve "the terrible monotony of Cole Porter singing and playing at the piano."[27]

Porter seems to have been receptive to Schwartz's ideas, writing to him on July 15 agreeing with several specific suggestions concerning scenes set in the hospital where Porter was recovering from the riding accident he suffered in 1937, some scenes set on the family farm in Peru, Indiana, and approving in particular the idea of starting the picture with him as an undergraduate at Yale. "The more I think of the childhood sequences on the farm, the more I dislike them," he added.[28] And he followed up on the idea to contact various stars, writing on September 6 and 16 to Danny Kaye, Betty Hutton, Jimmy Durante, and Sophie Tucker.[29]

But Porter was not happy with the revisions made over the summer or with an idea Schwartz floated in August: "We are planning to use the song 'In The Still Of The Night' twice in the picture. The second time will be deep in the story and with a production. We propose to use it for the first time in a scene in a church in Peru, Indiana. Cole has come home from Yale for the Christmas Holiday and the family has donated a beautiful organ to the church. It is Sunday morning and Cole is at the organ. A choir of twenty or thirty boys is singing the melody of 'In The Still of the Night,' and during its rendition we cut to Cole's mother and grandfather sitting proudly below." Porter wrote back on September 6: "It makes me very unhappy also to hear that you brought back that Peru, Indiana, business into the picture. I thought you had definitely thrown that out, of which I highly approved. If all of this Peru stuff is back in the picture, I want to read every line of it as the last version would have been extremely embarrassing had it been retained and I don't want in any way to upset my family."[30]

Things apparently did not improve much over the fall. On January 14, 1945, Jack Moffitt, one of MGM's writers, wrote a long letter to Jack Warner outlining what he saw as weaknesses in the script: "Though it pains me to say it, because Arthur [Schwartz] is a gracious gentleman and an able song writer, this script is full of bad decisions that will drive the American public nuts," the Porter represented in the film is one "most people would dislike. . . . Cole Porter, as presented, is a supercilious, conceited chiseler. No woman wants to think noble love songs come out of a man who is incapable of loving anyone but himself. . . . Women audiences no longer admire the kind of heroine who suffers and suffers and suffers, for the sake of some two-timing jerk who is unworthy of her. Today's woman regards any girl who repeatedly lets a heel walk on her as a moron. . . . No woman will let herself become a punching bag." He complained, too, that the script was too New York–centric to appeal to audiences outside the city and that the songs did not "show Cole Porter and his songs springing from the heart of normal American home life."[31] Moffitt's concerns suggest that the script at that point still contained a number of scenes derived from, or similar to, the early treatment of the story. One of those earlier scenes describes Linda watching Cole Porter play in a Paris bar: "Monty talks to Linda about Cole, to whom he realizes she is attracted, advising her that because of his unusual gift for entertaining people, he could never belong to one person alone. She knows this in her heart." In another, Porter ignores Linda at an after-party following the premiere of *Anything Goes*.[32] Moffitt's suggestions would have brought the script more in line with the paradigm for Broadway composer biopics, in particular with respect to a composer's "redemption" through the love of a supportive wife and, as he noted, by suggesting the film incorporate more of his "American heartland" home life: "Nothing," he wrote, "is made of his mother, father and grandfather, who possessed the humorous American common touch"—this notwithstanding Porter's actual relationship to his grandfather in particular: "My grandfather," Cole Porter told Richard Hubler in 1954, "was a hearty man with a high temper who always considered me extravagant. He used to drive me a couple of miles out into the rolling Indiana countryside and rein in his horse at the top of a rise. He would point with the end of his buggy-whip at a large, rather bleak gray building. 'That, Cole,' he would say, 'is the place you will end up.' It was the county poorhouse."[33] Porter's story goes some way to explaining why he wanted to suppress some scenes set in Indiana and begin the picture with his time at Yale.

About the same time, a script was submitted to the Hays office, which posed additional problems. Joseph Breen wrote to Jack Warner on January 16, 1945, asking for several changes in the song lyrics including "four letter words" in "Anything Goes" (Breen additionally noted that the British Board of Censors would delete "gigolos"); "hell" in "Blow, Gabriel, Blow"; "cocaine" in "I Get a Kick out of You"; "she strayed" and "led her so far astray" in "Miss Otis Regrets"; "Love that's only slightly soiled," "pay the price for a trip to Paradise" and "Follow me and climb the stairs" in "Love For Sale"; and "making the team" in "My Heart Belongs to Daddy." He also warned that the whole of "Let's Do It" would be "eliminated."[34] Schwartz wrote to Porter on July 13,[35] noting Breen's specific concerns and informing Porter that the first thirty pages of the script had been shot. Porter made several handwritten notations on Schwartz's letter. In the left margin, beside "BLOW, GABRIEL, BLOW" he wrote: "I was wrong. / Gabriel wrong / mighty wrong / etc.—so long" and under "making the team," "coaching." But in fact, few of the suggested replacement lyrics were used, in part because two of the songs mentioned by Breen—"Blow, Gabriel, Blow" and "Me and Marie"—were not used in the film and, in the case of "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," because the portion of the text in which the "offending" words occur were not included. In "I Get a Kick Out of You," the line "Some get a kick from cocaine" was replaced with "Some go for perfume from Spain." In a later letter, dated May 8, Breen also wrote, "We call your attention to the characterization of the minister in scene 49, so that you may be sure to see that he is represented in a virile and dignified manner."

Shooting had started in mid-June and the film was finished later in the fall. On November 20, Jack Warner sent Porter a (self-)congratulatory telegram: "DEAR COLE. HAVE FINALLY COMPLETED PICTURE. GOING ON RECORD WITH YOU. HAVE MOST IMPORTANT MUSICAL EVER PRODUCED." A preview was screened at the Warner Brothers Beverly Hills Theatre on February 11, 1946, and Porter himself saw the film in New York on May 3; it opened nationwide on August 3. In a letter to his friend Sam Stark he described it as "a dream" and he wrote to the director, Michael Curtiz, "you have our eternal gratitude for treating us so beautifully. What a great director you are and how lucky we were to have been put in your hands."[36]

* * *

*Night and Day* conforms to only some of the paradigms of biopics, or conforms to them only half-heartedly. In *Till the Clouds Roll By*, Kern is mentored by Jim Hessler (in real life Kern's orchestrator Frank Sadler),[37] who though he earns his living orchestrating, aspires to compose a symphony. Gershwin is mentored by Professor Otto Franck, a pupil of Brahms. Both represent, or are descended from, European, high-culture classical music (Professor Franck even has busts of Beethoven and Wagner on prominent display in his studio), yet both also recognize protégées' distinctly American talents or potential. Franck tells Gershwin, "America is a growing country, a mixture of things that are very old with more that is new. Your nature has the same contradictions, ideas and material ambition. If you can make them both serve, you will give America a voice." And Hessler tells Kern, "You are writing the real music, the folk music of America." In *Night and Day*, Porter has no such mentor. Even in the early treatment, the best he can do is Irving Berlin, the most successful American songwriter, to be sure, but not representative of the European tradition. This is a far cry, if Old World authority is what is sought, from Maurice Ravel's (played by Oscar Loraine) endorsement of Gershwin in *Rhapsody in Blue*: "Gershwin, if you study with me you will only write second-rate Ravel instead of first-rate Gershwin." But even beyond the biographical appeal to the authority of "high culture," the staging of the music in both films clearly focuses on hybridization and a mediation between the old and new worlds. *Till the Clouds Roll By* begins with extended excerpts from what is sometimes thought of as Kern's "American" opera, *Show Boat*. And *Rhapsody in Blue* focuses on concert works that similarly bridge the gap between Europe and America, between "high" and a purported "low," the title work, *An American in Paris*, and the *Concerto in F*. Porter has no such *magnum opus*, no show or concert work that bridges the cultural divide. The film makes no mention of Porter's early Paris ballet *Within the Quota* or his collaboration with Billy Rose on *Seven Lively Arts*, which included a ballet by Stravinsky. Perhaps *Kiss Me, Kate* might have served as Porter's "American" opera, but that show was still a few years in the future.

In any case, Porter never really suffers for not yet having an "individual voice," the way Kern and Gershwin do. Rather, at least early in his career, he loses faith in the voice he already has. This is established early on in the early treatment by a scene where Porter, struggling for success, plays, first, at a cheap vaudeville theater, and then at a country fair "where he is accompanying a hill-billy [*sic*] male quartet . . . we see him trying to simplify his lyric style in the manner of the more standard song-writer of the day. All of this is to no avail."[38] Or, there is something missing in his songs: again, in the early treatment, the failure of Porter's *Hitchy-Koo* (1919) and *Greenwich Village Follies* (1924) is neither the fault of their lack of "voice" nor their failure to represent some hybrid of high and low, informed by prestigious European traditions. Rather it is their seeming coldness: "The critics are unanimous in their own personal approval of his songs, but feel they lack the common touch." Both of these tropes are carried over in the final film, and more than once. While in Paris, the French club owner Anatole Giron (played by Victor Francen) tells Porter his lyrics are "too smart, too sophisticated." And in a scene where Porter and Monty Woolley perform "Miss Otis Regrets" for the fictional Broadway producer Leon Dowling (played by Alan Hale), Dowling tells Porter his song is "too clever and too different," adding: 'I don't know, I really don't know. Of course, I heard it here [he points to his ear] but I didn't feel it here [he points to his heart], and it's my heart that buys the songs that sell my shows." This may relate to Moffitt's complaint that in the script he read, Porter is an unsympathetic character: a cold fish personally, he writes cold fish songs. As it happens, Dowling is wrong. In the almost immediately following scene, where Porter is working as a song plugger, dozens of customers in the shop are mesmerized by his "What Is This Thing Called Love." And this scene is followed by a sequence showing the success (out of chronological order) of *The New Yorkers* (1930), *Fifty Million Frenchmen* (1929), and *Paris* (1928).

As for "Americanness," these are ever-present in *Till the Clouds Roll By* and *Rhapsody in Blue*. In the Kern film, the Anglophile impresario Charles Frohman says there are "no good songsmith[s] in America; the only good ones come from Europe"—the obvious plot point being that Kern would become the "good American songsmith." This bias was more than apparent to the critics. "Why is it necessary," the *New York Times* wrote, "to have people say such pompous things to him [Kern] as 'Yours are the folksongs of a nation.' "[39] And in *Rhapsody in Blue*, as already noted, Franck tells Gershwin he can "give America a voice." Both films represent a "fashioning of an indigenous, nationally homogeneous culture" joining Broadway and Hollywood "at the hip," as Tibbetts puts it.[40] But this idea is almost entirely absent from *Night and Day*. The only even tangential references to America—both trivial and neither having broader implications for the film—are two scenes early on, where Linda Lee convinces the French singer Gabrielle (played by Eve Arden) to sing one of Porter's songs, describing him as a "young American composer," and the scene where Porter's grandfather, hoping Porter will become a lawyer, pointedly gives him a series of books on "American Law" as a Christmas present. But Tibbetts's idea that "Don't Fence Me In" stands as a clear expression of Porter's "Americanness" misrepresents and overvalues the scene in its specific context and the context of the film as a whole. In the film, the song—written in the aftermath of Porter's riding accident and after Linda has left him because he pays more attention to his work than to her—lasts a mere 15 seconds. And it is flanked, as part of a longer scene in which

Porter effects his recovery through work, first by "Do I Love You" (implicitly while he is thinking of Linda since the immediately preceding action has Porter asking Woolley not to contact her), and immediately afterwards by an extended, six-minute stage production of one of Porter's least American-sounding songs, "Begin the Beguine," clearly the highlight of this stretch of the narrative. The whole is not about Americanness or even synthesizing Americanness, nor is it about Porter's recapturing Linda's love through a turn to Americanism. It is about throwing himself into his work as therapy and trying to suppress his feelings for her, which the sequence of songs could be understood successfully to achieve. What is more, by concluding with "Begin the Beguine," the sequence distances Porter from a stylistic Americanness of the sort represented by "Don't Fence Me In" and by both *Till the Clouds Roll By* and *Rhapsody in Blue.*

In a similar vein, Porter, unlike Gershwin in particular, does not have an ethnic background that, like his music, demands assimilation. He is upper class, the scion of a wealthy family, an alumnus of Yale, a sophisticate and indisputably "American." Gershwin, on the other hand, like the Irving Berlin character in *Alexander's Ragtime Band* (Twentieth Century–Fox, 1938), is a child of immigrants and the Lower East Side; and like Berlin, he must not only make his music "American" but must Americanize himself.[41] *Night and Day* seems to take a potshot at this particular biographical trope (and in the case of Gershwin and Berlin truism) when producer Leon Dowling's assistant tells Porter, "You should have been born on the East Side like some of our more popular boys." The extent to which the Old World plays a role in *Night and Day* has little to do with a hybridization of long-established European and newer American cultures. The extended sequences in the film that are set in London were more for strictly narrative purposes, in particular the reunion of Porter and Linda, who he had left to pursue his career on Broadway, or, possibly, to forestall any accusation of lack of imagination or slavish adherence to precedent in the film's competition with *Rhapsody in Blue*: on April 13, 1944, Arthur Schwartz wrote in a production memo, "Cut down on the amount of footage given to France and substitute for it new scenes in London where Cole Porter worked on many shows. I suggest this not only because it is better for Cole's story, but also because of the large amount of French footage in the Gershwin picture."[42]

Porter's Americanness, such as it is, merely lurks in the background, or is taken for granted, or is even a sop to the studio's encouragement of the composer; it is not the point of the film, as it is with *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Till the Clouds Roll By*. For Jack Warner, Americanness seems to have been something he could use to flatter Porter into agreeing to the film, writing him on September 23 1944, "I FEEL WITH [director Michael] CURTIZ AND [producer Arthur] SCHWARTZ CONFERRING WITH YOU IT WILL GIVE US ALL A CHANCE TO GET THE ULTIMATE OUT OF A GREAT STORY OF WHAT I CONSIDER A VERY IMPORTANT AMERICAN GUY." Curtiz, for his part, didn't see the film as an American story either, at least at first: "I ALWAYS HAVE FELT THAT WITH THE FABULOUS STORE HOUSE OF MUSICAL MATERIAL IN YOUR CATALOG TO WORK WITH WE COULD MAKE AN ENTERTAINMENT BUT NOT UNTIL THIS PAST WEEK HAVE I FELT

THAT IN ADDITION TO THAT WE COULD CONTRIBUTE A GREAT HUMAN AMERICAN STORY," he wrote to Porter on August 28, 1944. It was, perhaps, only the manipulation of the narrative to strengthen the love story between Porter and Linda that convinced him it was a "great human" story (Porter himself valued this aspect of the film in particular, describing it in a letter to his lover Nelson Barclift as having a "wonderful love story of Cole and Linda"[43]).

*Night and Day*, then, largely fails to conform with the paradigm of the Broadway composer biopic, whether in the terms laid out by Tibbetts, or as Jane Feuer describes it: "The biopic could use the writing of the numbers for its narrative with the performance of those same numbers as the spectacle."[44] By Feuer's definition, *Night and Day* is spectacle only, largely without the narrative of "writing the numbers." A more fruitful approach to the definitional problem, an approach that bypasses the constraints of genre, may be the one described by Rick Altman: in its mediation of the syntactic and the semantic, *Night and Day* takes some basic tropes of biopics, musicals, and good old-fashioned romance to find a "common ground" where "the audience's ritual values coincide with Hollywood's ideological ones," regardless of what sort of film it is.[45] The very title suggests this: *Night and Day* is a semantic given with respect to both its specific text and as a song. But it is made to conform to a different syntax that goes beyond the generic. Altman makes the point with regard to *Till the Clouds Roll By* that in the syntax of the show musical, "[m]usic must never be seen as something one does solely to make a living. To make music is to make love; to make love is to inspire art."[46] This is exactly what happens in *Night and Day*: the song—the semantic "text"—is heard, aside from the opening credits, both early in the film when the convalescent Porter is inspired by Linda and again at the very end when they reconcile during a ceremony at Yale honoring Porter's career. But more than that, at important moments in the story where Porter is thinking of Linda, "Night and Day" is a prominent part of the underscoring. The song thus achieves a syntactic meaning beyond the semantic to represent music making love and love inspiring art.

*Night and Day*, in any case, gives every indication of being, essentially, a love story rather than a biopic per se. Lobby posters for *Rhapsody in Blue*, *Till the Clouds Roll By*, and *Night and Day* tell a similar story (see Figures 14.2–14.4).[47] A lobby card for *Rhapsody in Blue* is all about the music: while it does include headshots of the main characters, including Gershwin's (failed) love interests singer Julie Adams and socialite Christine Gilbert (played by Joan Leslie and Alexis Smith, respectively), it is dominated by images of performers singing and dancing their way through Gershwin's greatest hits; toward the bottom it bills the show as "The Jubilant Story of George Gershwin." *Till the Clouds Roll By* is not so (implicitly or explicitly) Kern-related, although it does picture the Kern character demonstrating a song for Hessler's daughter Sally. Rather, it both dispenses with picturing a romantic female lead and gives Judy Garland (playing Marilyn Miller) more prominence than Kern himself, pointedly advertising her performance of "Look for the Silver Lining" (from Kern's 1920 Ziegfeld production *Sally*—Miller's real-life performance of the song in that show was a sensation) and showing her in a production of Kern's 1925 musical *Sunny*. By contrast, *Night and Day* lobby cards are largely about romance. There is one image in particular: Cary Grant kissing Alexis Smith. Porter's name doesn't even appear, as do Gershwin's or Kern's on the *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Till the Clouds Roll By* lobby cards. To be sure, filmgoers would have known what they were going to see: the reviews make it clear that all three films were, at least nominally, biopics. But the visual imagery of these lobby cards makes distinctions among them: the Gershwin film is about his life (with music), the Kern is about his music (with life), and the Porter is about romance.

To judge by descriptions of the film at the time, Warner Bros. thought of *Night and Day* not so much as a biopic as a musical. Jack Warner, it will be remembered, sent Porter his congratulatory telegram describing the film as a musical. And the *New York Herald Tribune* similarly noted the film's bias to musical production, rather than musical creation, an otherwise standard characteristic of artist biopics: " 'Night and Day' is a gala tune-fest, sticking to the creations of a popular song-writer rather than the birth-pains attending them."[48] The review in *Life*, as noted, is subtitled, "Film about Composer Cole Porter Is an Exemplar of What's Wrong with Hollywood Musicals."[49] More obliquely, the *New York Times* for July 27, 1946, reported that, "While 'Night and Day' begs quick dismissal as an idealistic smattering of biography about a living personality, there is no denying that it is stuffed with the gaudy things that make for a visually handsome entertainment." *Till the Clouds Roll By*, by contrast, never lets the music overwhelm the

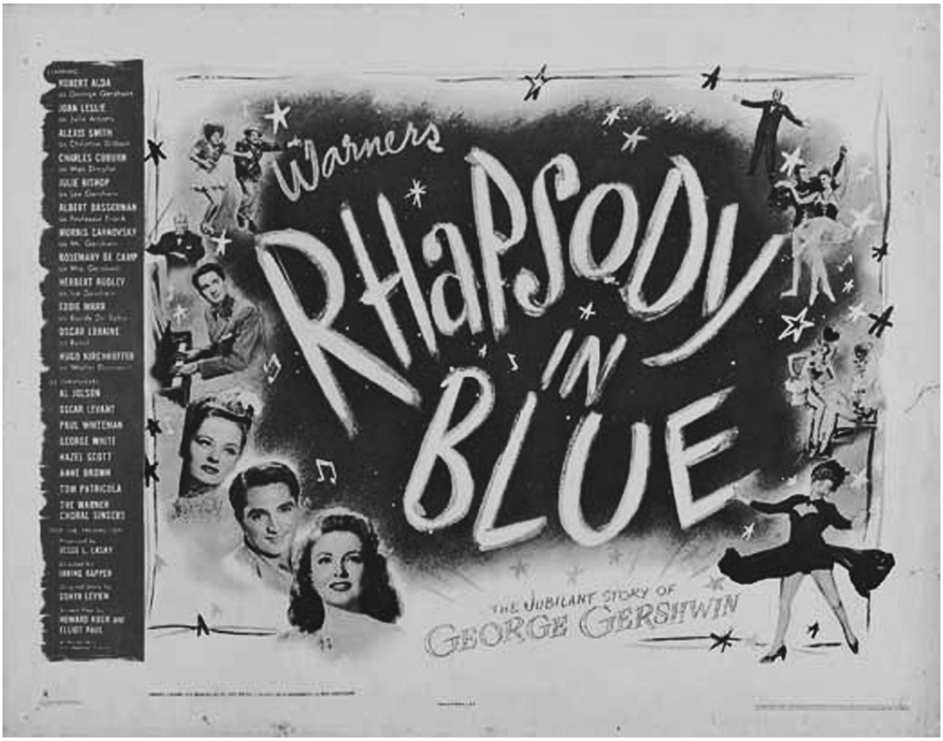
ROBERT ALDA
JOAN LESLIE
ALEXIS SMITH
CHARLES COBURN
JULIE BISHOP
ALBERT BASSERMAN
MORRIS CARNOVSKY
ROSEMARY DE CAMP
HERBERT RUDLEY
EDDIE MARR
OSCAR LORAINE
HUGO KIRCHHOFFER
AL JOLSON
OSCAR LEVANT
PAUL WHITEMAN
GEORGE WHITE
HAZEL SCOTT
ANNE BROWN
TOM PATRICOLA
THE WARNER CHORAL SINGERS
JESSE L. LASKY
IRVING RAPPER
SONYA LEVIEN
HOWARD KOCH and ELLIOT PAUL
Warners
RHAPSODY IN BLUE
THE JUBILANT STORY OF
GEORGE GERSHWIN

**FIGURE 14.2** *Rhapsody in Blue* lobby card.

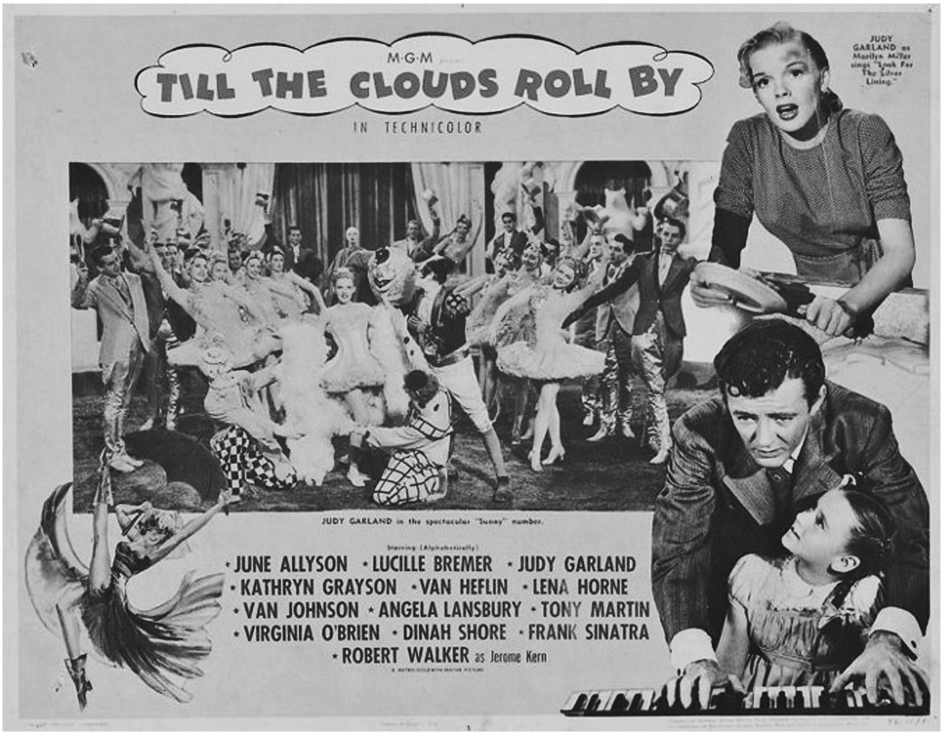
M·G·M presents
TILL THE CLOUDS ROLL BY
IN TECHNICOLOR
JUDY GARLAND as Marilyn Miller sings "Look For The Silver Lining."
JUDY GARLAND in the spectacular "Sunny" number.
Starring (Alphabetically)
JUNE ALLYSON · LUCILLE BREMER · JUDY GARLAND
KATHRYN GRAYSON · VAN HEFLIN · LENA HORNE
VAN JOHNSON · ANGELA LANSBURY · TONY MARTIN
VIRGINIA O'BRIEN · DINAH SHORE · FRANK SINATRA
ROBERT WALKER as Jerome Kern
A METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PICTURE

**FIGURE 14.3** *Till the Clouds Roll By* lobby card.

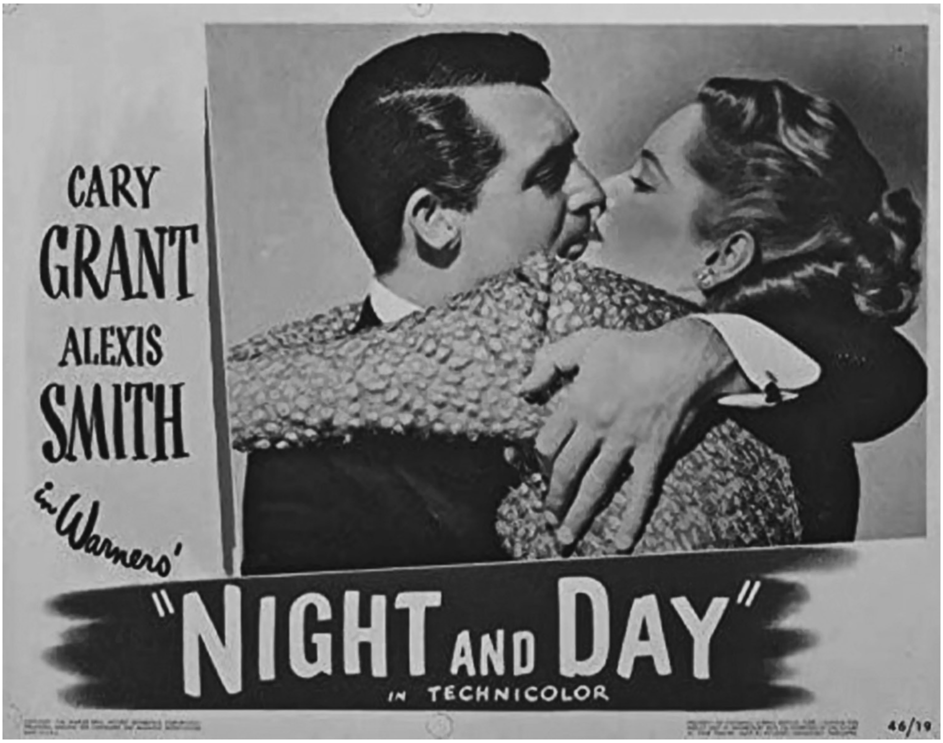
CARY GRANT
ALEXIS SMITH
in Warners'
"NIGHT AND DAY"
IN TECHNICOLOR
46/19

**FIGURE 14.4** *Night and Day* lobby card.

biography but rather frames it with its extended sequences from *Show Boat* at the beginning and end (Bosley Crowther thought that possibly the film would have been better if the music *had* overwhelmed the biography: "with such a plethora of performers as it has used in this omnibus film—such competent Metro youngsters as June Allyson, Cyd Charisse and Dinah Shore—it certainly could have stuck to production and let the story go, thus giving us a span of entertainment which would have been much more in line with Jerry Kern"[50]).

At best, then, *Night and Day* is a romance with music, the film equivalent of a Broadway show in which boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back. And considering its plentiful fictions—especially in the context of its billing as a Cole Porter biopic—it most closely approximates a romance jukebox musical. Porter himself more or less characterized it this way in 1954 he told Richard Hubler: "When the *frères Warner* produced *Night and Day*, they wanted my songs—so they made the picture to fit them."[51]

## NOTES

1. *Marie Antoinette* (MGM, 1938) and *Marie Curie* (MGM, 1943); *Frontier Marshal* [Wyatt Earp] (Twentieth Century–Fox, 1939); *Jesse James* (Twentieth Century–Fox, 1939); *Young Mr. Lincoln* (Twentieth Century–Fox, 1939); *Edison the Man* (MGM, 1940); *They Died with Their Boots On* [George Armstrong Custer] (Warner Bros., 1941); *The Loves of Edgar Allan Poe* (Twentieth Century–Fox, 1941); *Pride of the Yankees* [Lou Gehrig] (RKO, 1942); and *Dillinger* (Monogram Pictures, 1945).
2. Bosley Crowther, "Living Biographies, Hollywood Style," *New York Times*, January 20, 1946, 89.
3. *Mission to Moscow* (Warner Bros., 1943); *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo* (MGM, 1944); and *Pride of the Marines* (Warner Bros., 1945)
4. *Rhapsody in Blue* (Warner Bros., 1945); *Night and Day* (Warner Bros., 1946); and *Till the Clouds Roll By* (MGM, 1946).
5. *Harrison's Reports*, June 30, 1945, 102; *Life*, July 16, 1945, 89.
6. *Harrisburg Telegraph*, December 30, 1946, 14.
7. See *Variety*, January 8, 1947, 8. *Night and Day* grossed $4 million; the top-grossing film of 1946, *The Bells of St. Mary's*, brought in $8 million.
8. *New York Herald Tribune*, August 4, 1946, C1.
9. *New York Times*, June 28, 1945, and December 6, 1946.
10. *Life*, August 5, 1946, 101.
11. *New Yorker*, July 27, 1946, 48–49.
12. See, e.g., John C. Tibbetts, *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 108–109. Also see Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 8–9, who more generally notes that the major studios—MGM, Paramount, Warner Bros., RKO, Universal, Twentieth Century–Fox, and Columbia—hewed to "a consistent system of production and consumption, a set of formalized creative practices and constraints, and thus a body of work with a uniform style—a standard way of telling stories from camera work and cutting to plot structure and thematics."
13. Curiously, considering that in some respects it represents even more of a synthesis of high and low, of American and European culture, than his concert works, *Porgy and Bess* is barely mentioned in *Rhapsody in Blue*; the film includes, near the end, only a relatively

short scene with a staging of "Summertime," which is quickly overtaken in the narrative by Gershwin's premature death.

14. Tibbetts, *Composers in the Movies*, 123. See below, however.
15. Cliff Eisen and Dominic McHugh, *The Letters of Cole Porter* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2019), 37–38.
16. John C. Tibbetts, "The New Tin Pan Alley: 1940s Hollywood Looks at American Popular Songwriters," in *Perspectives on American Music, 1900–1950*, ed. Michael Saffle (New York: Garland, 2000), 349–384, here: 355–356.
17. See, e.g., Ellen M. Peck, "Cole Porter's Fabulous Film Lives: Night and Day *and* De-Lovely," in *The Composer on Screen: Essays on Classical Music Biopics*, ed. Paul Fryer (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018), 131–139.
18. George Eells, *The Life That Late He Led: A Biography of Cole Porter* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1967), 220.
19. Warner telegrammed Porter on August 7: "DEAR COLE: HAVE JUST CULMINATED THE DEAL WITH ARTHUR LYONS FOR THE STORY OF YOUR MOST WONDERFUL LIFE. AM POSITIVE WE HERE AT THE STUDIO WITH YOUR AID WILL MAKE A PICTURE WE WILL ALL BE PROUD OF." Porter replied on August 9: "DEAR JACK. I AM DELIGHTED TO HEAR THAT DEAL HAS BEEN SET AND I AM SURE WE CAN MAKE A SWELL PICTURE."
20. Yale University, Music Library, MSS 131, William McBrien Papers, Series IV, Box 4, Folder 105.
21. The earliest reference to the film title *Cavalcade* appears to be Porter's telegram to Arthur Lyons of September 13, 1943: "WHAT IS THE REASON FOR DELAY IN SUBMITTING TO ME WARNER BROTHERS CONTRACT FOR CAVALCADE?" See Eisen and McHugh, *The Letters of Cole Porter*, 185.
22. *Night and Day*, draft treatment, 5, 9 and 10.
23. *Night and Day*, draft treatment, 16. The Senegalese Spahis, a mounted cavalry, saw action in French West Africa during the nineteenth century and in Morocco from 1908 to 1919. The Zouaves were a light infantry regiment attached to the French army; originally consisting of Berber volunteers, the Zouave saw action mostly in French North Africa from 1830 to 1962. A version of this scene made it into the final film.
24. Jeanne Florentine Bourgeois (1875-1956), the French singer and actor known for her risqué performances.
25. Bordoni had starred in Porter's 1928 show *Paris* and she is mentioned in "You're the Top" from *Anything Goes* (1934): "You're a prize, / You're a night at Coney, / You're the eyes / Of Irene Bordoni." Chevalier had recorded "You've Got That Thing," from Porter's 1929 show *Fifty Million Frenchmen*, in 1930.
26. Copy at the Cole Porter Literary and Musical Trusts, New York, Correspondence 1944. The casting of Grant as Porter has sometimes been both misunderstood and misinterpreted. George Custon, for example, implies that Warner Bros. was behind his casting and that Porter "gave up" his right to suggest who should play him in the film when he sold his story to the studio; George Custon, "Night and Day. Cole Porter, Warner Bros., and the Re-Creation of a Life," *Cinéaste* 19, no. 2–3 (1992): 43. In fact, Grant was Porter's choice; as he wrote to his lover, Nelson Barclift, once the casting details were more or less settled, "I got everything I asked for including Cary Grant"; see William McBrien, *Cole Porter* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 293. Custon's assertion plays a role in his larger argument concerning the studio's suppression or revisionist stance with respect to Porter's homosexuality in particular, and homosexuality generally, but its political value is undermined by its factual misrepresentation.

27. Yale University, Music Library, MSS 131, William McBrien Papers, Series IV, Box 4, Folder 105. Grant apparently put a great deal of effort into his piano playing for the film. In a letter from late March 1945, Arthur Schwartz, the producer of *Night and Day*, wrote to Porter: "I have been in touch with Cary very frequently, and the other day he came in to demonstrate his piano virtuosity. It's remarkable that he can play so well. He had studied the published piano part of all the songs he will be seen doing, and plays all the notes as they are written . . . what I'm doing now is to have some slightly fuller piano parts made so that when Cary's hands are shown, he will be constantly doing something interesting." See Eisen and McHugh, *The Letters of Cole Porter*, 240.
28. Eisen and McHugh, *The Letters of Cole Porter*, 201. In the end, scenes showing Porter's childhood in Peru were not included in the film.
29. Eisen and McHugh, *The Letters of Cole Porter*, 206–207.
30. Eisen and McHugh, *The Letters of Cole Porter*, 208–209.
31. Yale University, Music Library, MSS 131, William McBrien Papers, Series IV, Box 4, Folder 105.
32. *Night and Day*, draft treatment, 20 and 32.
33. Richard Hubler, *The Cole Porter Story, as Told to Richard G. Hubler* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1965), 5.
34. Yale University, Music Library, MSS 131, William McBrien Papers, Series IV, Box 4, Folder 105.
35. Yale University, Music Library, MSS 131, William McBrien Papers, Series IV, Box 4, Folder 105.
36. Eisen and McHugh, *The Letters of Cole Porter*, 250 and 259–260.
37. Stephen Banfield, *Jerome Kern* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 23.
38. *Night and Day*, draft treatment, 23.
39. *New York Times*, December 6, 1946.
40. Tibbetts, *Composers in the Movies*, 105.
41. The same sort of argument is made by Andrea Most with respect to *Oklahoma!* See her "'We Know We Belong to the Land': The Theatricality of Assimilation in Rodgers and Hammerstein's Oklahoma!," *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 113, no. 1 (1998): 77–89.
42. Yale University, Music Library, MSS 131, William McBrien Papers, Series IV, Box 4, Folder 105.
43. Letter of May 21, 1945; see Eisen and McHugh, *The Letters of Cole Porter*, 244.
44. Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 96.
45. Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 90–102, esp. 98–99.
46. Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 237–238.
47. It is a bit disingenuous to describe only three lobby cards among the dozens that were produced for *Rhapsody in Blue*, *Till the Clouds Roll By*, and *Night and Day*, but I have chosen cards that are generally representative of the full range of lobby cards for these films.
48. *New York Herald Tribune*, August 4, 1946, C1.
49. McBrien, *Cole Porter*, 207.
50. *New York Times*, December 6, 1946.
51. Hubler, *The Cole Porter Story*, 46.

# PART IV

# STARS

## CHAPTER 15

# THE PROBLEM OF PLAYING ONESELF

## *Oscar Levant and the Hollywood Musical*

NATHAN PLATTE

> "Oscar Levant is his usual phlegmatic self."
>
> —Review of *The Band Wagon* (1953)[1]

Oscar Levant claimed that Hollywood miscast him as himself.[2] The joke speaks to how closely intertwined failure, achievement, and identity were interwoven for Levant, whose many occupations (pianist, composer, actor, and comic writer) reflected both the opportunities and liabilities of such multifaceted talent. Levant's playing of himself in musicals began early in his career, when at twenty-one he was cast as a pianist in the Broadway show *Burlesque* (1927) and its cinematic adaptation, *Dance of Life* (1929). Beginning with *Rhythm on the River* (1940), Levant resumed honing onscreen variations of himself. Over the next fifteen years he appeared in a dozen feature films, most of which were musicals featuring major stars of the studio era, including Fred Astaire, Leslie Caron, Cyd Charisse, Bing Crosby, Doris Day, Gene Kelly, Mary Martin, and Ginger Rogers. In these films, Levant inhabited secondary roles specially designed to showcase his proprietary blend of one-liners and pianistic virtuosity.

But unlike other secondary characters, Levant brought with him a crossover star persona that served as foil and ballast for the marquee stars he supported. This chapter argues that while Levant's performances of himself changed only slightly, the shifting emphasis he received across these films through musical performances presented competing solutions to the problem that Levant's characters posed. How *does* a cynical, marginalized pianist "play" in the earnest, optimistic genre of the Hollywood film musical, where singing and dancing drive the entertainment? This chapter addresses this question by setting analysis of his onscreen roles within the context of his broader celebrity. Levant's work as a concert artist and writer, his close relationship with the Gershwins, and his struggles with mental health informed his onscreen roles and characterized the peculiar authenticity that Levant's characters embodied within the film musical.

In "The Self-Reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," Jane Feuer argues that "perhaps the primary positive quality associated with musical performance [in the Hollywood musical] is its spontaneous emergence out of a joyous and responsive attitude toward life. . . . *The Barkleys of Broadway*, *Singin' in the Rain*, and *The Band Wagon* contrast the spontaneity of Astaire or Kelly with the prepackaged or calculated behavior of other performers."[3] Spontaneity, Feuer notes, is often posed against "strained, artificial 'serious' performances" that fall short and reinforce—through negative example—the positive ingenuity of seemingly improvised expression. By disavowing the extensive labor behind these "impromptu" performances, the film musical posits itself as "spontaneous and natural rather than calculated and technological."[4] Although Levant's presence in both *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949) and *The Band Wagon* (1953) may be purely coincidental (Feuer's remarks are directed at Astaire's characters, not Levant's), the notion that "spontaneity . . . emerges as the hallmark of a successful performance" was a quality that Levant cultivated in facets of his offscreen-onscreen career. Levant's success in this endeavor was a feat in itself. Levant had trained as a classical pianist: a vocation centered on disciplined execution of technically challenging, precisely notated repertoire. But as Levant's prowess at piano developed, he simultaneously gained a reputation among entertainment insiders for devasting wit and ingratiating sarcasm. As Levant's spontaneity with words gained wider renown through his radio work on *Information, Please*, filmmakers perceived in Levant a uniquely cinematic cachet. Film, unlike a staged concert or radio show, could accommodate more of Levant's talents, allowing the virtuosic pianism and unpredictable wit to play together. Levant's star persona would eventually be defined by contradictory expressions of spontaneity and strain.[5] Although the balance between the two would shift over time, the combination proved both distinctive and valuable to the Hollywood musical. Levant welcomed this opportunity while also recognizing its challenges. Reflecting on filmmaking after appearing in his second feature film, Levant admitted "this isn't my racket—it's not spontaneous. It makes me nervous."[6] Nevertheless, the continuity of Levant's offscreen work (playing piano, hobnobbing with entertainers, wisecracking) with his onscreen roles encouraged the impression that he was "simply" playing himself. Although there was truth to this observation, its frequent repetition belies the more interesting reality: Levant brought different versions of himself to each film.[7] In addition, each film narrative applied a distinct filter to his star persona, illuminating certain facets while dimming others.

## FINDING FILM THROUGH AN ECLECTIC CAREER

> "If I had your talent, I would be extremely irritating."
> —Oscar Levant as "Oscar Levant," speaking to
> George Gershwin in *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945)[8]

Born in 1906 in Pittsburgh, Levant was the youngest of four sons, all of whom received music lessons from an early age. Benjamin, the second son, was Oscar's first piano teacher.[9] The eldest, Harry, journeyed to New York where he enjoyed a career conducting Broadway shows. Oscar followed his older brother in 1922 and benefited from his sibling's professional connections, although his ambitions were considerably broader, ranging from writing music for the stage to becoming a concert pianist. More important, Levant began what would become a lifelong habit of tracking George Gershwin, whose career "created the means by which Oscar Levant would become renowned."[10] Levant had been taken by Gershwin's piano work during his Pittsburgh boyhood when he heard the composer accompany Nora Bayes in *Ladies First* (1918).[11] Seven years later, Levant would be called at the last minute to record Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* as a sub: his 1925 recording was the first to follow Gershwin's own. Friendship with the Gershwins followed soon after, and Levant eventually became a near ubiquitous presence in George and Ira's adjoining penthouse apartments. Levant would benefit from these personal relationships on multiple professional levels. As a pianist, he amassed authority as a definitive interpreter of Gershwin's works, regularly performing and recording Gershwin's compositions throughout his concert career. As an acerbic raconteur, Levant gained notoriety through the Gershwins' parties and connections with New York's entertainment community.[12]

Levant's casting in *Burlesque* led to a trip to Hollywood, where he recreated his stage role in the retitled *Dance of Life* (1929). Although Levant's contributions are limited—he is onscreen for only a few shots and his offscreen piano playing is heard for the duration of an apartment party—he was able to use the sojourn to begin building networks in the film industry, where he wrote occasional songs for over a half-dozen musicals at RKO, the studio that had produced *Dance of Life*.[13] Over the course of the 1930s, Levant bounced between New York and Los Angeles as he honed the skill sets that many of his onscreen characters would flaunt in 1940s and 1950s productions: obliging vocal accompanist, capable songwriter, occasional solo pianist, aspiring composer, and grumpy, self-deprecating sidekick. By the late 1930s, Levant's "character" began to edge into mainstream media through his casting in the popular radio quiz show *Information, Please*, and a best-selling memoir, *A Smattering of Ignorance* (1940), which finally collated Levant's diverse accomplishments and personal idiosyncrasies within a single work. Film would soon become another conducive form for representing and shaping Levant's emergent brand.

Paramount's *Rhythm on the River* (1940) gave Levant an expanded role that capitalized on his achievements of the preceding decade.[14] Levant's unusual qualifications are emphasized in the film's first scene, set at a lavish New York party hosted by Oliver Courtney (Basil Rathbone), a renowned songwriter. As an onscreen dance orchestra plays the conga, a woman asks, "and *who*'s the man at the piano?" At this moment Levant steps away from the instrument mid-performance, as though both music and attention annoy him. "That's Mr. Courtney's assistant, Billy Starbuck," responds her companion. Struggling to explain the pianist, his brow furrows with effort: "He's . . . sort of a jack of all trades." The comment and Starbuck's behavior point to the "real" Levant, cuing audiences that his onscreen role will play upon his offscreen notoriety as a multitalented, difficult-to-pin-down musician.

*Rhythm on the River* stars Bing Crosby and Mary Martin, who are cast as aspiring songwriters. Having been hired individually by Courtney to ghostwrite his material, Bob (Crosby) and Cherry (Martin) labor in isolation, both believing that Courtney is writing each song's other half. After Bob and Cherry become friends, Courtney's ruse becomes untenable. As Courtney's assistant, Starbuck has the sticky task of shielding Courtney from discovery by running interference between Bob, Cherry, and anxious Broadway personalities impatient to start rehearsing Courtney's forthcoming show. Like *Dance of Life*, *Rhythm on the River* is a backstage story about entertainers who are struggling to thrive in a cutthroat industry. Although Courtney's primary concern is ostensibly "putting on a show" (the conventional aim of the backstage musical), *Rhythm on the River* never bothers with the show itself, limiting its energies to song plugging. Songs are tried out for other songwriters, performers, publishers, and producers. They are performed in offices, at parties, and on the radio—all purportedly to see if a new tune will carry. This strategy of setting scenes around singers and songwriters trying out material created an ideal space for Levant to serve as an overqualified accompanist.

Shortly after Starbuck's introduction to the audience, Bob arrives during the party to deliver a song that Courtney has been anxiously awaiting. As the party continues, Bob, Starbuck, and Courtney gather in an office to audition the song. Rather than play through the piece himself, Courtney has Bob sing and Starbuck accompany. Handing Starbuck the sheet music, Bob cautions, "It may be a little tough for you." Starbuck's line lands less facetiously than Bob's: "Is this your handwriting?" (Levant really plays piano; Crosby did not really write the song.) Levant, sharing this scene with two pretenders, *is* a songwriter, even though his character is not. The scene continues:

STARBUCK: "Do you want me to play it the way it's written?"
BOB: "Oh, you can surprise me a little."
STARBUCK: "I will, honeysuckle."

Levant attacks the keyboard with the opening of Chopin's Etude Op. 10, No. 12 in C Minor. Despite the demands of the rapid passage, Levant removes a cigarette from his mouth, placing it beside the keyboard while playing.

BOB: "Woah! Hey, is that in there?"

Starbuck grins and starts the introduction, with Bob carrying the vocal. After the last note, Starbuck says, "that's easily the best thing you ever wrote," a compliment that both Courtney and Bob accept at the same time.

Crosby's performance of the new song "What Would Shakespeare Have Said" (Johnny Burke and James V. Monaco) is off-handed and casual: a reflection of Crosby's temperament and the story setting. (His singing must not disturb the partygoers in the next room.) Starbuck disregards all of this. His accompaniment, though delivered with a light touch, zips and darts around Crosby's voice like a humming bird. His dynamic swells and micro-rubato liberties jangle anxiously against Crosby's steady groove. In a sly bit of blocking, Levant's active shadow sways and jerks over the sedate Crosby, who leans on the edge of a desk. Crosby biographer Gary Giddins faults Levant's contribution for being "absurdly ornamental" and overmiked, but the emphasis on his misbehavior is clearly deliberate.[15] By appearing to improvise wildly, Levant deploys his own variation on Feuer's "myth of spontaneity." Bob endorses the myth by chuckling twice into his lyric, signaling cheerful astonishment at Starbuck's abandon.[16]

The value of Levant's earnest accomplishment is affirmed through the following scene, when Courtney takes the song out to the party, handing the music to the contracted star and orchestra. Singer and instrumentalists immediately commence playing. Although this performance marks the song's public debut and the musicians' first attempt at a performance, this is the second time the film audience has heard "What Would Shakespeare Have Said." The performance is pitched to disappoint. Dulcet strings and sustained, operetta-like delivery lend the song a bland affect that Bob and Starbuck—listening through the office door—quickly dismiss. "She doesn't get any life into it—no bounce. Don't you think so?" Bob says, turning to Starbuck. Starbuck shudder-shrugs in agreement: "Lavender, no lace. Good as gruesome."

The "authentic" spontaneity of Levant's accompaniment delivers pleasures that are conspicuously absent from the party version. This strategy of hearing the same song twice—performed once "right" and then "wrong"—recurs across the film. The next paired performances serve as a companion to the first. In the first sequence Courtney works with Cherry, who is trying to devise a lyric for a melody that Courtney claims to have written (but was actually composed by Bob). With the lyric complete, an audition of "That's for Me" ensues: Courtney listens, Cherry sings, and Levant accompanies, giving each phrase a chortling fill. At song's end, Starbuck repeats his earlier compliment, "*That's* easily the best song you've ever written." Cherry and Courtney say "thanks" at the same time.

Later, when Cherry and Bob's friendship deepens, but before they discover Courtney's deception, Bob plays "That's for Me" to Cherry, explaining that she had inspired him to write the song. Bob's just-the-plain-chords accompaniment contrasts unfavorably with the gleeful pianistic asides in Levant's version. Cherry, believing that Bob is falsely claiming authorship of Courtney's tune (and her lyric), recoils from the imitation. Even though Bob *is* the author of the melody, the absence of Levant's volatile energy dooms its delivery.

The role of Starbuck was added to the script late, so director Victor Schertzinger (a real-life songwriter whose "I Don't Want to Cry Anymore" is sung in the film) gave Levant considerable freedom to shape his role.[17] As Irene Kahn Atkins notes, this unusual circumstance "helped create the myth that Oscar always 'played himself.' "[18] Such impressions—shared in many reviews of the film—overlooked the deft inclusion of Starbuck into so many different scene types, which served the dual purpose of displaying Levant's talents while also integrating his character more thoroughly into the story. After demonstrating his piano skills through song accompaniment, Starbuck indulges in broader comedy when he stalls an angry producer anxious for Courtney's latest songs. Hopping among solo piano works by Rachmaninoff and Chopin, Starbuck describes unlikely scenarios for each melody, claiming that these are Courtney's new songs for the show. (One involves a dragon mother cooing to her baby.) "Can't Courtney write anything better?" the producer sneers. "Frankly, no," Starbuck admits. This easy blend of musical virtuosity and comedic timing shows the side of Levant that radio listeners had cherished. "By reducing his musical training to a parlor game," write his biographers Sam Kashner and Nancy Schoenberger, "Levant epitomized what *Information, Please* was all about—culture without elitism, a bridge between highbrow conversation and popular sensibilities."[19] It was not only musical training that Levant was willing to reduce: in another scene Starbuck slouches in a chair, reading Levant's *A Smattering of Ignorance*. "A very irritating book," Starbuck observes after tossing the copy aside. As the reviewer for *Variety* noted, Levant "gives the initiated a laugh on himself" with this gag, but the self-reference also shows Levant inverting his actual success (published author, Hollywood actor) into self-deprecating failure, in which a lesser form of himself *onscreen* dismisses the achievements of his offscreen doppelganger.[20] The verbal maneuver is as winsome as it is counterintuitive (Figure 15.1).

What *Rhythm on the River* lacks in comparison to Levant's later films is a solo performance at the keyboard. Given Starbuck's role as assistant, such a scene might have felt

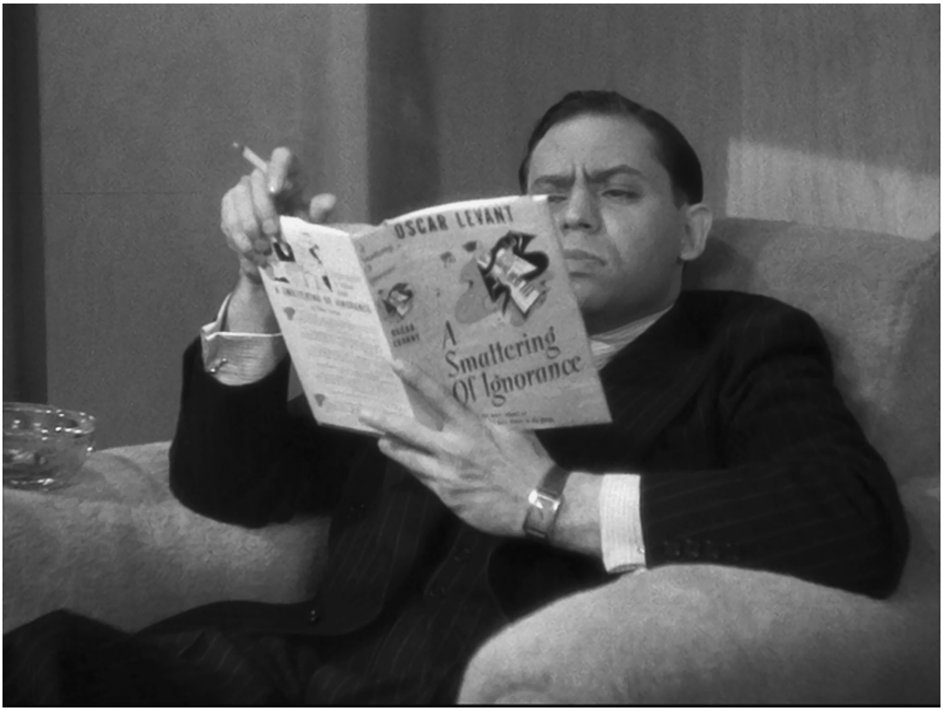

**FIGURE 15.1** In *Rhythm on the River* (1940), Starbuck grimaces while reading Oscar Levant's recently published memoir, *A Smattering of Ignorance*.

unnecessary and, even for the whimsical story, implausible. Film musicals did not typically feature solo performances from instrumentalists. Furthermore, among Levant's many offscreen achievements, his exploits as a concert pianist were less widely known, with Levant's live performances largely limited to Gershwin's music. By the early 1940s, however, Levant was expanding his repertoire and performing more regularly.

*Kiss the Boys Goodbye* (1941) marked this extension of celebrity by according him two solo scenes. In this next Paramount musical, Levant is still an assistant, but he is promoted to Broadway composer. (Although Levant is identified in the credits as "Dick Rayburn," everyone in the film calls him "Oscar"—a delectable confusion of Levant's onscreen/offscreen characters.) In the film he works alongside the show's producer (Don Ameche) to find an appropriate female lead for their Southern-themed musical.[21] After a montage sequence shows auditioning chorus girls singing "Kiss the Boys Goodbye," a crossfade reveals Levant at the piano, playing the same melody. Levant's version saturates the chipper tune with Debussyan arabesques and runs. "Wait a minute, wait a minute, Oscar," interrupts the show's producer, "I've been listening to you for ten minutes and I can't make head or tale out of what you're doing. Now will you play it simply?" "But I'm not a simple fellow," responds "Oscar." He resumes playing, at first more simply, but soon he pivots to Chopin's Etude Op. 25, No. 11. Levant ends his solo by reprising the song's melody, but tremolo on each melodic pitch creates a virtuosic stuttering effect. "What's that?" the producer inquires with exasperation. "I'm nervous!" "Oscar" confesses. In terms of narrative function, the scene plays the same comedic role as Starbuck's stalling campaign with the producer in *Rhythm on the River*. But there are significant changes: Levant's performance is set as an extension of the previous song number in an attempt to suggest some continuity between the film's songs and Levant's performance at the piano. The scene also places greater attention on Levant's spontaneous pyrotechnics: his work doesn't have to compete with a singer and he isn't speaking over his playing. Finally, this is his first scene of the film. Before hearing a line from Levant, audiences first enjoy his feats at the piano.

A second performance occurs later, after composer and producer have arrived at a plantation-style household.[22] When the producer asks about the two-manual harpsichord in the living room, "Oscar" explains that it is a "sort of seventeenth-century jive instrument—swell for minuets and gavottes." "I could use a gavotte right now—with a chaser," mutters the producer. Levant obliges with two passages from J. S. Bach's English Suite No. 5 in E Minor.[23] His selection is just over half a minute in duration, but it is an astonishing—and narratively extraneous—concession to Levant's proficiency in Baroque repertoire. (Indeed, the matching of a visual cut with Levant's shift from one movement of the suite to another allows for the possibility that Levant may have played more for the cameras, with the performance truncated during editing.) It is a quintessentially Levantian moment in which "serious" performance is leavened with spontaneity: this is managed through Levant's nonplussed embrace of the unusual instrument and the scene's casual shift away from his performance. For fifteen seconds Levant and the instrument occupy the full frame, compelling the spectator to observe Levant's work in a medium profile shot. But for the next fifteen seconds, the camera cuts first to the producer studying knickknacks on a mantel before cutting again to a woman dressed as a Southern belle, who swoops into the room. "Oscar" blanches. "See, that's what happens when you play harpsichord," he says. The miniature performance reflected Levant's growing clout as a pianist and also served as cross-promotion for Levant's upcoming tour and album release. Billed as "concerts with comments," Levant's inaugural season of solo recitals would feature his trademarked banter around solo selections—rather like "Oscar's" scene with the harpsichord.[24] Later the same year Levant would also record for Columbia an array of repertoire that showed off new versatility: evergreen Gershwin selections were joined by Chopin, Brahms, Shostakovich, Schoenberg, Ravel, . . . and Bach.[25]

Although the presence of the harpsichord in the film helped Levant's contribution stand out—Levant's professed irritation with the instrument received special notice in Philip K. Scheuer's column in the *Los Angeles Times*—these novelty sequences did not outweigh the broader disconnect of Levant's music from the film's song numbers.[26] *Rhythm on the River* had privileged intimate performances, where Levant's conspicuous piano accompaniments could be joined with the headlining stars' vocals. *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* favors instead large choruses and visual spectacle that did not require Levant's presence. Even Levant registered this gap, although he framed it in more acidic terms: "I won't be any good in this one. I haven't anyone to attack—with words, of course. My lines in *Rhythm* sort of wrote themselves."[27] *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* gave Levant playing opportunities but counterintuitively revealed the extent to which Levant's music-making with other stars was key for his persona and the film's narrative.

## Levant's Onscreen/Offscreen Concertizing

> "If you had to do it all over again, would you still fall in love with yourself?"
> —Oscar Levant as "Oscar Levant" in *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945)

Warner Bros.' *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), like the studio's earlier *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), merged biopic with the backstage musical. Inevitably, Levant was cast as literally himself in what he accurately described as "a preposterous version of Gershwin's life."[28] Although Paul Whiteman, Al Jolson, and Hazel Scott also appear in the film as themselves, Levant's performance in the film was not limited to Levant alone. He also dubbed the major piano solos played by Gershwin (Robert Alda), giving rise to curious scenes in which the onscreen "Levant" applauds "Gershwin's" (actually Levant's) performance of *The Rhapsody in Blue.* (This bizarre circumstance would be elaborated to an absurd degree in the Concerto in F scene from *An American in Paris.*)

In the film, "Levant" also plays onscreen on multiple occasions. Charting these performances shows an expansion of Levant's cinematic musicianship from

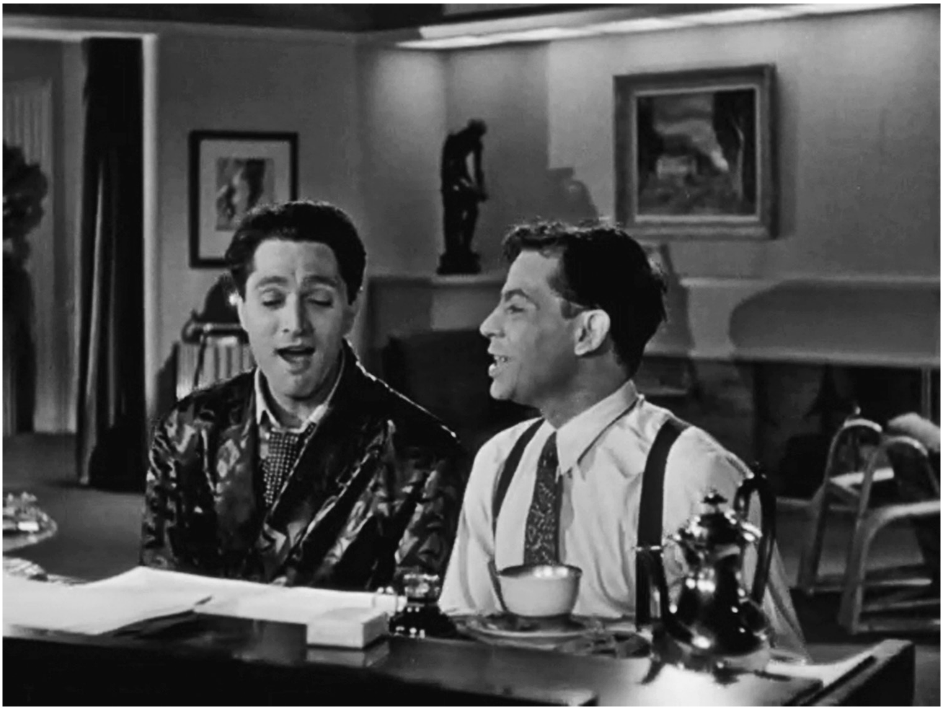

**FIGURE 15.2** Playing himself in *Rhapsody in Blue* (1944), Levant shares a piano-and-vocal duet with George Gershwin (Robert Alda).

"spontaneous" and silly accompanist (as in his earlier films) to elite, studied concert virtuoso. At ninety minutes in the film, Levant sits down at a piano for the first time to regale partygoers with an impromptu "Somebody Loves Me." The performance is almost immediately aborted by the arrival of Gershwin, who soon joins Levant in playful piano-duels of "Someone to Watch over Me" and "I've Got Rhythm." Levant's next performance is revealed gradually. As a camera slowly pans across Gershwin's penthouse, the sound of piano and voices singing "Mine" is heard. Eventually, the camera rests on Gershwin and Levant playing together at the piano (Figure 15.2). Audiences may have been surprised to see Levant singing too, although this newfound musical talent is pitched strictly for laughs. Screwing up his nose and adding superfluous vowels, Levant imitates an Italian tenor, drawing laughter from Gershwin and his manager. Such sequences reprise similar scenes from *Rhythm on the River*, where Levant's character offers goofy yet skilled work to small audiences in offices and apartments. Levant's later sequences, however, voyage far beyond where *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* only tentatively treaded. When Gershwin collapses from his brain tumor, the shock is punctuated with a hard cut and the explosive orchestral introduction to the third movement of the Concerto in F. The scene shifts abruptly to a concert where Levant performs the work in front of an orchestra. Once again Levant's performance is interrupted: a telegram is handed to the conductor, who announces that Gershwin has died. As his words are spoken, the camera focuses on Levant's face. The performance of the concerto then resumes; its continuation makes clear that Levant is now the bearer of George's legacy.

The next and final scene of the film cuts forward in time to the memorial concert held at the New York Lewisohn Stadium. Levant is again the soloist, this time for *Rhapsody in Blue*. For those who missed the subtext of the previous scene, it is reiterated more forcefully here: a ghostly image of George Gershwin is superimposed over Levant as he performs at the piano, suggesting that the genius of Gershwin now animates Levant's playing.[29] Like the rest of the film, onscreen details depart from the historical record: Levant did not perform the *Rhapsody* at the first Lewisohn Stadium memorial concert.[30] Yet the Lewisohn Stadium Gershwin concert became an annual affair, with Levant making repeat appearances to play the Concerto in F and—usually for the finale—*Rhapsody in Blue*. Indeed, this was precisely what Levant did for the 1945 Lewisohn concert, held just weeks after the film had opened in New York.[31] Even without the concert, the film's ties to Levant's expanding career as concert pianist and recording artist were emphasized through magazines and music stores. In 1942 Columbia Records had already released an album of Levant performing the Concerto in F with the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra of New York (the orchestra depicted in the film). In 1945 the label released a recording of Levant performing the *Rhapsody*, timed to coincide with the film's presence in theaters. Advertising copy from Columbia was not shy about linking Levant's acting and recording careers for consumers:

> Intimate friend, devoted disciple—no artist is as well qualified to interpret the music of the late great George Gershwin as the brilliant concert pianist, Oscar Levant. . . . See Oscar Levant starring, as Oscar Levant, in Warner Brothers' new motion picture hit. . . . Then hear Oscar Levant, the fabulous wit, author, actor, composer, conductor, and concert pianist in his great Gershwin recordings on Columbia Masterworks Records.[32]

The deliberate harnessing of Levant's real-world concertizing to his onscreen characters was motivated by cross-marketing synergies, but the ascendance of Levant as "serious" concert artist created new liabilities. It was more difficult to envision "spontaneous" performances of demanding concert repertoire. Subsequent filmmakers had to decide how many facets of Levant's career one film could bear.

Levant's next three productions reflect this pressure: *Humoresque* (1946, not a musical, but a film about classical musicians) preserved Levant's wit and concert artist credentials but downplayed his relationship to popular song, popular singers, or Gershwin. The musicals *You Were Meant for Me* (1947) and *Romance on the High Seas* (1948) struggle to accommodate the full Levant apparatus into the films' musical numbers. Although Levant enjoys substantial onscreen time, his work as a pianist is practically quarantined from character and narrative development. *You Were Meant for Me* includes an arresting solo-piano rendition of highlights from the Concerto in F, but little attempt is made to rationalize the performance or explain why Levant, cast as a band manager, is also a piano virtuoso. In contrast, Levant's three musicals for MGM's Freed Unit, *The Barkleys* *of Broadway* (1949), *An American in Paris* (1951), and *The Band Wagon* (1953), offered more compelling integrative solutions.[33] Poignantly, these solutions had to be adapted as Levant's achievements offscreen crested and his mental and physical health troubles became better known.

In *The Barkleys of Broadway*, Levant is cast as Ezra Millar, a Broadway composer: his role echoes his part from *Kiss the Boys Goodbye*, where he played a composer tasked with arranging the romantic union of the film's main stars. In *The Barkleys* it is a reunion: musical theater stars Josh (Fred Astaire) and Dinah Barkley (Ginger Rogers) are already married at the film's start, but their volatile relationship prompts a separation. Levant's Ezra schemes of ways to bring them back together. Levant's special status in the film is announced in the first scene, where he bounds on the stage to accept credit for the successful debut of a new show starring Josh and Dinah. (Earlier in his career, Levant had written a handful of songs for Rogers in the 1935 film, *In Person*.) It is the first time Levant plays a role where his character is not professionally subservient to one of the film's stars.[34]

Although a composer of showtunes, Ezra is also a gifted concert pianist. At a party to celebrate the new show's successful premiere, Josh declines singing on account of an oncoming cold. Ezra steps forward, assuring the hostess that "I'm in beautiful voice tonight." Shuddering, she suggests he play instead. Sitting down at the piano, Ezra engages in light banter with the audience. After a brief snippet of Chopin's Etude Op. 25, No. 11 (also heard as an excerpt in *Kiss the Boys Goodnight*), Ezra turns to the audience, "did anyone ask to hear the Sabre Dance?" Shouted requests for *Rhapsody in Blue*, Liszt's "La Campanella," and Lecuona's "Malagueña" are all disregarded. Over audible groans from the audience, Ezra launches into Khachaturian's "Sabre Dance." Aside from generating humor, the hard sell for the showy work pointed outward to Levant's discography and recital programs. Columbia had released a performance of his transcription of Khachaturian's orchestral piece in 1948. It had become one of the best-selling classical records of the year.[35] Including this Levant-special in the film marked a brazen bit of cross-marketing that was nonetheless welcomed in the UK magazine *Musical Express*: "Levant, accompanied by a fifty-piece orchestra, will play the same arrangement of the number for which he has won plaudits both in concerts and on the radio in the States."[36] The film, in other words, would provide what radio and albums could not: a chance to *see* Levant the concert pianist at work.

This was quite a different strategy from the "spontaneous" accompaniments and impromptu performances Levant had offered in his Paramount films. Indeed, the performance—though purportedly offered to save Josh from singing—is comedically non-spontaneous in other respects. Ezra ignores audience requests to proceed with a predetermined selection. Interestingly, the back-and-forth with offscreen partygoers is not included in the film's shooting script and may have been devised by Levant himself. The script reads: "[Ezra] doodles aimlessly at piano, a moment—then lurches into the 'Sabre Dance.' During selection CUT to Josh and Dinah glaring at each other. DISSOLVE TO: [next scene]."[37]This description leaves open the possibility that the scene might have ended in the middle of Ezra's performance or, at least, conclude without Ezra being shown onscreen. The film, in contrast, elevates the performance to the status of a musical number on par with the songs sung by Astaire and Rogers. *Mise-en-scène* serves to articulate this heightened station. Ezra performs in front of a blue curtain on a stage, although the setting is still the hostess's apartment. Instead of hearing only piano, Levant is accompanied by full orchestra, as would a singer in a musical number. Interestingly, members of the accompanying orchestra are revealed near the performance's midpoint, when the camera cuts from a profile angle of Levant to a medium-closeup showing a handful of string players behind him. Serving as both joke and justification (there *is* an orchestra in the apartment), this shot further endorses Levant's entertainment as a stand-alone musical number. During the sequence, spectators see Levant's hands execute acrobatics as they dance and blur over the keys. Perhaps in a desire to impress knowing fans, Levant begins the dance at approximately 195 bpm, significantly faster than his opening 180 bpm on the Columbia recording. Other gestures remind film audiences that Levant enjoyed onscreen privileges extended to no other star. During a small rest in the piece, he turns to grin over his shoulder at someone offscreen (possibly in the orchestra). It's a fleeting concession to Levant-specific spontaneity: breaking a performance to smile at one's own accomplishment. Instead of standing and bowing for the applause at the work's conclusion, Levant reaches for a cigarette and shrugs bashfully as the scene fades out.

After having his earlier offer to sing rejected, Ezra is later obliged to participate vocally when he is forcibly "integrated" into the song "A Weekend in the Country." As Josh, Dinah, and Ezra disembark from a train and walk toward a country house, the married couple sing about the pleasures of being away from the city. Ezra—literally caught between the two—joins their "spontaneous" musical celebration, although his lines offer cranky rejoinders to their cheerfulness:

JOSH: With golf and tennis 'round you / and no cares to hound you
DINAH: When mother nature beckons, who can decline?
EZRA: Till mother nature vetoes the beetles and mosquitoes / mother nature is no
mother of mine.

The song's lyrics—penned by Ira Gershwin—are built around Levant himself, who famously disliked non-urban settings and had already voiced similar anti-rural sentiments in his role in *Humoresque*.[38] What gives the song its charm is that it dramatizes the effort and limited success of integrating Levant's persona into a song set away from a piano. Josh and Dinah must link arms with Ezra, who keeps trying to bolt from the musical number (Figure 15.3). Even vocal delivery emphasizes Ezra's insider/outsider status. Although Levant is finally incorporated as a singer in a full-fledged song (his brief vocalizing in *Rhapsody in Blue* is for only an excerpt), the wobble in his voice contrasts with the breezy confidence of Astaire and Rogers. A residual echo around only Levant's lines suggests he was still learning how to "play" the microphone as well.

These examples show that while effort was made to integrate Levant's character and concert persona in the MGM musical, the conspicuous strain of such effort was part

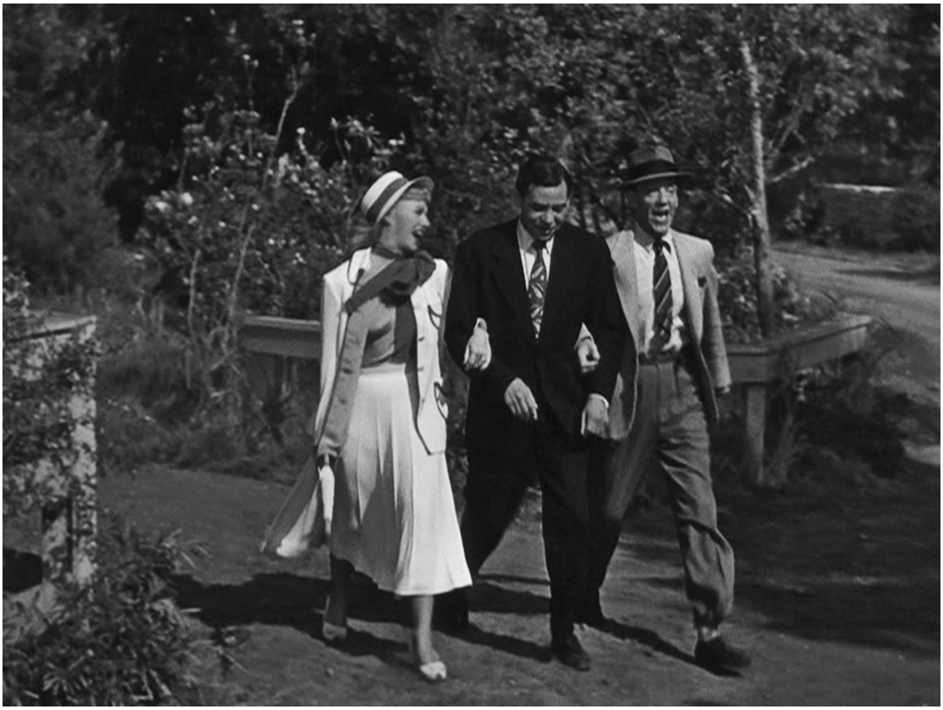

**FIGURE 15.3** Josh and Dinah hang on to Ezra, a reluctant participant in "A Weekend in the Country" from *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949).

of the entertainment. This is especially evident in Levant's performance of a 7-minute arrangement of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1, heard at a benefit concert. Large-scale performances of symphonic repertoire were not uncommon in Hollywood, but they tended to be featured as culminating sequences near the end of dramas, such as *Four Wives* (1938), *City for Conquest* (1941), *Humoresque* (1946), and *Deception* (1946). *Barkleys* is not a drama, and the performance concludes a half-hour from the film's end. Like the "Sabre Dance" number, however, the performance points outward to Levant's recent discography: his recording of the Tchaikovsky concerto with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra had been released months earlier, in the fall of 1948. The performance is also spiced with spontaneous humor—Levant makes eyes at adoring female fans while the orchestra plays. At roughly the midpoint of the piece, Dinah encounters Josh in the stage wings. She is unpleasantly surprised, and the two argue in hushed tones. This is savvy storytelling: their unexpected meeting was orchestrated by Ezra, whose performance of Tchaikovsky serves as underscore to their testy reunion. This also allows the performance to fill more time without halting the story. Once Josh and Dinah resolve to stay and perform, the camera cuts back to the final minutes of Levant's performance. As the audience claps, Ezra bows and says, "Thank you. I'm touched, the piano is touched, and, um, Tchaikovsky is touched." This is funny by itself, but the line also serves as a cross-film reference to *Humoresque*, where Levant's character is forced to play an aggressively abridged version of the Tchaikovsky concerto on the radio. In that case, a cut to the concerto's length becomes a point of bitter contention for one of the musicians. In the more jovial world of *The Barkleys*, such abbreviations are of little concern to the performers, the onscreen audience, and—if Ezra is to be believed—Tchaikovsky himself. With this scene and the preceding "Sabre Dance" sequence, *Barkleys* also granted Levant's concert pianist persona a role not intimately tied to performing works of George Gershwin—a significant concession for a performer so closely associated with George's legacy.[39]

If *The Barkleys of Broadway* expanded Levant's role and drew him closer to the marquee stars through side-by-side performance, *An American in Paris* capitalized on this trend to stunning effect. The film's director, Vincente Minnelli, had befriended Levant through the Gershwins and their circle in the mid-1930s.[40] Under those circumstances, casting Levant in this second Gershwin-themed film seemed appropriate. In contrast to the biopic *Rhapsody in Blue*, however, *An American in Paris* was a jukebox musical featuring beloved Gershwin selections ("I've Got Rhythm," *An American Paris*) alongside lesser-known titles from the catalog. The film's three male leads—Gene Kelly, Levant, and Georges Guétary—introduce themselves in the film's opening montage with a series of whimsical voice-overs. Levant's character, Adam Cook, is an American pianist and composer living in Paris. Before Adam is even seen on screen, his voice-over announces Levant's unmistakable voice and wit: "I'm a concert pianist. That's a pretentious way of saying that I am unemployed at the moment." As the voice-over continues, Adam is revealed sitting at the piano, but he quickly gets up to apply eye and nose drops—a reference to Levant's offscreen embrace of pharmaceutical assistance. Other Levant idiosyncrasies, including drinking coffee continuously and chain-smoking, are incorporated into the film for humor, as in a scene where Jerry (Kelly) and Henri (Guétary) speak tenderly of romance, not realizing they love the same woman. Adam, the only onscreen character aware of the trouble, twitches visibly as he attempts to gulp coffee while still smoking.

Although Levant's role is arguably more ancillary than in *Barkleys of Broadway*, where Ezra helps bring Josh and Dinah back together, Levant's Adam enjoys many more musical romps than previous roles. Early in the film, Adam noodles Gershwin's "Fascinating Rhythm" on the piano behind dialogue, a prelude to his serving as piano accompanist and occasional singer in "By Strauss," a song that emerges unexpectedly from a conversation held in a Parisian side café. As Levant pumps simple chords from the piano, Jerry and Henri pull surprised café workers into an impromptu waltz. In terms that closely resemble Feuer's discussion of spontaneity in the film musicals, Minnelli explained that "By Strauss" "had to not look like a number, it had to look spontaneous . . . like it just happened."[41] Indeed, the original number had been born from "kidding" at the piano at a Gershwin soirée in the mid-1930s. Minnelli, who had been present, requested the Gershwins finish the song for his 1936 stage production *The Show Is On*.[42] (One wonders if Levant was also present at the party.) For this reprise of the song in *American in Paris*, Minnelli freed Levant from on-set displays of virtuosity to focus instead on being a comic sidekick to Jerry, including a hammy bit of melodramatic roleplaying, where the two engage in a mock duel. Consequently, Levant's piano work is mostly submerged in orchestral accompaniment and visually obscured through camera angles.[43] Even Levant's few sustained vocal passages—all sung in harmony with Kelly and Guétary—are credited to singer Mac MacLain.[44] Ironically, it is this diminishment of Levant's musical contributions that points to an elevation of his character's cachet within the film. Levant's Adam is a key member of the film's male trio: his onscreen inclusion in the film's first song outweighs any expectation that he "play" the role of piano virtuoso.

While Ezra suffers through only one song in *Barkleys*, Levant's Adam receives more vocal excursions in *American in Paris*. "Tra-la-la" is another less familiar song rendered utterly charming through its performance by Adam and Jerry.[45] The scene begins with Adam appearing to write a "serious" composition at the piano: the work includes motives from "Tra-la-la" that are framed with Chopin-esque flourishes. Jerry, hearing this from the hallway, interrupts by singing the syllables "Tra-la-la" to the melodic fragment, as though improvising a light-hearted song from Adam's belabored exertions. Adam initially resists, playing against the song and grumpily telling Jerry to leave him alone. Unphased, Jerry sings without accompaniment and bestows a gentle kiss on Adam's head. Slightly surprised, Adam gives in and begins playing along on piano. When Jerry begins to tap dance, Levant's simple oom-pah accompaniment blossoms into soloistic extravagance, with shades of Saint-Saëns commingling with echoes of Fats Waller. This polystylistic mini-concerto—written by musical supervisor Saul Chaplin and further adapted by Levant[46]—is background to Kelly's dance routine, but both actors continue to trade lines and engage in physical humor, with Kelly even joining Levant at the piano. These interactions raise Adam's supporting role to a more exalted plane that is closer to Jerry's, showing off the two characters' mutual virtuosity and affection.[47] There may well be no other sequence that blends so many of Levant onscreen-offscreen traits so pleasurably: gliding from frustrated, coffee-drinking composer to obliging song accompanist to full-fledged film-and-concert entertainer.[48]

Levant's biggest scene in *American in Paris* is one of his own devising. Producer Arthur Freed had wanted Levant to fashion a medley of fantasies on Gershwin song tunes. Although these were recorded,[49] Levant pitched an alternative "ego fantasy" on Gershwin's Concerto in F, third movement. A shot of Adam daydreaming on his bed dissolves to a shadow-drenched concert hall where Adam is piano soloist. As the sequence unfolds, the orchestra is gradually revealed. Every last person in the ensemble is *also* Adam, whether pounding timpani or waving baton. After the final chord, an alarmingly enthusiastic audience member bawls, "Bravo! *Encore*!" from a box. This is, of course, Adam too. The concerto fantasy was not Minnelli's first indulgence in mind-bending musical reverie: Robin Wood notes similarly surreal numbers in *Yolanda and the Thief* (1945) and *The Pirate* (1948).[50] Even so, the cloning of Levant's character across so many individuals was a quintessentially Levantian ploy, allowing him to exult in grandiose musical accomplishment while acknowledging self-deprecating mortification at such conceited fantasizing. Adam the soloist and Adam the conductor wince at the grotesque ecstasy of Adam the audience member.[51] The number, however, serves

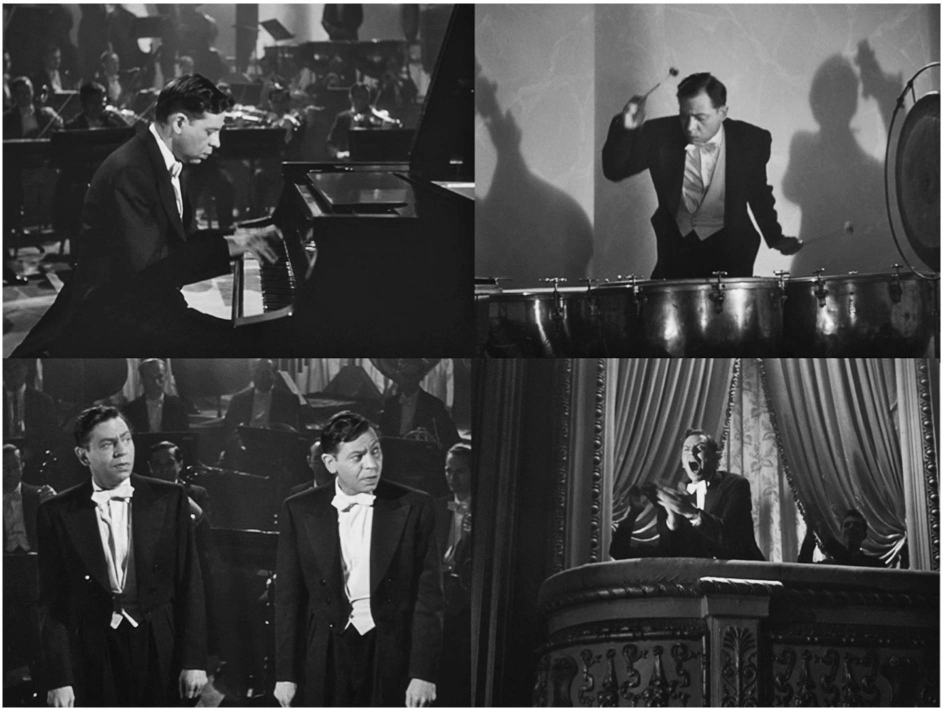

**FIGURE 15.4** In *An American in Paris* (1951), Adam imagines himself as soloist, conductor, orchestra member, and euphoric listener in his daydream performance of Gershwin's Concerto in F.

more than Adam's ego: its flight of fancy is a preparatory complement to Jerry's dream ballet in the film's finale (Figure 15.4).

## FILMING A FALLING STAR

> "In high school I was voted the boy most likely to succeed. In college they said I had a brilliant future. I wonder whatever became of me."
>
> —Oscar Levant as Oscar Farrar in
> *Romance on the High Seas* (1948)

*An American in Paris* was not Levant's final film, but it marked a culminating exhibition and integration of his talents as actor, comic, and musician in a Hollywood musical.[52] Four other films followed, but only two were musicals. The peculiarities that benefited Levant in *American in Paris* (all-Gershwin works, all-male vocals) proved not easily replicable. *The I Don't Care Girl* (1953), a biopic about vaudeville entertainer Eva Tanguay, is instructive. Levant plays a vaudeville pianist—Charles Bennett—whose career intersects with Eve's at multiple junctures. Bennett's career and circumstances afford plenty of opportunities for music numbers, but the performances are staged (as opposed to "spontaneously" initiated) and awkwardly presented. In "Hello, Frisco, Hello," Levant sings and plays piano with his male stage partner. Although the number is pitched as a nostalgic evocation of an earlier era (similar to "Fit as a Fiddle" from *Singin' in the Rain* [1952]), the number is flat in affect: a far cry from the ebullient clowning with Kelly in "Tra-la-la." As soon as the number is finished, Levant's Bennett takes to the piano alone, regaling the audience with a medley derived from Liszt's "Liebestraum" No. 3; Chopin's Etude Op. 25, No. 11 (now a standby alongside the Concerto in F in Levant's onscreen repertoire); and Liszt's Concerto No. 1. A full orchestra joins in when Levant abruptly toggles from Chopin to the concerto. As Bennett plays, he notices in the wings of the stage that Eva is receiving amorous attention from a romantic rival. This cutting between onstage performance and offstage drama recalls the Tchaikovsky sequence in *The Barkleys of Broadway*, but its juxtaposition with "Hello, Frisco, Hello" makes little musical or narrative sense.[53]

MGM's *The Band Wagon* (1953) reunited Levant with Minnelli. The film's story was conspicuously self-reflexive, which may have been why Levant, always seeming to "play himself," was an appropriate choice. Levant plays composer Lester Marton, who is married to Lily, a lyricist. The couple was loosely modeled after Adolph Green and Betty Comden, who furnished *The Band Wagon*'s story and screenplay. (To extend the self-reflexive gag further, Fred Astaire plays an aging stage-and-screen star whose arrival in New York is outshone by a sighting of Ava Gardner.) Levant's part, however, hardly required his distinctive musical skills. Although he participates by singing and striding in "That's Entertainment," the only other song that involves Levant musically is his accompaniment of Astaire on piano in "I Love Louisa," another "spontaneous" number that arises during a cast party. Levant's accompaniment is unusually generic, and his hands are rarely visible. His quasi-operatic baritone is deployed for comic effect, but for much of the number he is not even onscreen. Instead, *The Band Wagon* illuminated a less flattering side of Levant's real-life character: an irrational temper often directed at June Levant, his wife. Although the out-of-proportion outbursts in the film are intended to be funny, they play awkwardly, possibly an inadvertent reflection of actual on-set tension. Nanette Fabray, who plays Lester's wife, recalled that Levant "was a real pain in the neck. I mean, he had nobody to pick on [so] he picked on me." Levant corroborated this, admitting that he treated Fabray as he would his own wife: "atrociously."[54] Although Levant's prickly personality was not new, his struggles with mental and physical ailments were becoming more frequent and public: a heart attack shortly before *The Band Wagon*'s production precluded his involvement in the "Triplets" song. Levant went to considerable effort to downplay the extent of his physical debilitation, even though it was obvious to cast members that he was not well.[55]

In his thirteenth and final feature film—a number that likely bothered the profoundly superstitious Levant—he collaborated again with Minnelli. *The Cobweb* (1954) is set in a mental institution where Levant plays a jittery and miserable resident who undergoes shock therapy. Although *The Cobweb* was not a musical, Minnelli and Levant mutually agreed the film was a good fit. Minnelli even adjusted a pre-existing role to better match Levant's mental "hang-ups."[56] And so Levant was able to conclude his film career as he had started it—playing versions of himself that reflected facets of his changing offscreen persona. Since production on *The Band Wagon*, Levant's deteriorating mental health had become more widely known through a growing string of canceled concerts. These finally resulted in a much-publicized suspension from the musicians' union. Although the public did not yet know the full extent of Levant's struggles with opioid addiction and illness, odd behavior at concerts and an erroneously reported suicide attempt (later corrected by the *Los Angeles Times*[57]) served to reconfigure the shape of Levant's celebrity. As Kashner and Schoenberger observed, "his celebrated past achievements were being wiped out by the image of his neurotic, self-destructive personality."[58] What made *The Cobweb* astonishing and, in light of contemporary celebrity culture, prescient, was Levant's apparent willingness to share this new persona onscreen, replacing feats of musical virtuosity and wit with displays of mental aberration that were stigmatized. Kashner and Schoenberger claim *The Cobweb* as a culmination of a different sort: "Never before had Levant's onscreen role meshed so perfectly with the life he was living."[59] This correlation was not welcomed by all. When Levant's widow, June, was invited to a screening of the film at the American Film Institute in the mid-1970s, she declined.[60] While Levant's cinematic finale offers viewers little pleasure, it upholds Levant's stubborn integrity on the matter of performing himself. Virgil Thomson's observation on Levant's compositions is applicable here: "I sometimes wish Levant would not work so hard at being a composer. He seems afraid to relax and let music write itself. But every man must scale Parnassus in his own way. Maybe the hard way is the only one he would feel right about taking."[61]

## CONCLUSION

> "That is one of the disarming qualities of Mr. Levant. He may belittle friend and foe alike, but look what he does to himself."
>
> —Howard Taubman's review of *A Smattering of Ignorance*[62]

Levant's celebrity continued beyond his film career. Even if Levant had evidently exhausted the possibilities that filmmakers and writers could envision for him on the big screen, there were further opportunities for him to entertain audiences (and offend sponsors) through radio and television.[63] In the 1960s he returned to the memoir, a form he had successfully explored just before his film career had taken off with *Rhythm on the River* (1940). *The Memoirs of an Amnesiac* (1965) and *The Unimportance of Being Oscar* (1968) provided Levant the performance space once afforded by film musicals. Through memory and the written word he could reconnect readers with skill sets and relationships that had since become inaccessible to him: friendships with deceased or estranged celebrities, long-past concert performances, and film roles from an earlier era. The memoirs also reminded audiences of what had made Levant's onscreen presence in film musicals so attractive: his onscreen stardom was defined by the beguiling contradiction of his own biography. Although Levant died in 1972, interest in his multifaceted stardom has grown recently in the popular press, in part prompted by Sony Classical's 2018 release of a box set of his piano recordings. The title is generously apportioned to capture as much of Levant's sprawling celebrity as possible: *A Rhapsody in Blue: The Extraordinary Life of Oscar Levant: Pianist, Composer, Author, Comedian and Hollywood Star*. Multiple reviewers of the CDs observed that Levant was a social media star before social media: someone who thrived across disparate platforms and branded these achievements with an inimitable persona, readily recognizable in print, radio, and film.[64] While contemporary constructions of celebrity may help us better appreciate Levant's durable cultural contributions, Levant's work in film musicals is especially vital for appraising him and the genre itself. The film musical was the one place where audiences could *see* and *hear* Levant play concert works, accompany popular songs, compose fictional opuses, sing, and poke fun at headlining stars. Collectively, Levant's roles show that the fixity of "playing oneself" in the self-reflexive musical gave his star persona greater freedom in other respects. He was a supporting player granted star-like exposure in musical numbers. His onscreen characters could reference—implicitly and explicitly—his offscreen achievements. His spontaneous verbal and musical moments could coexist with pointedly unspontaneous concert performances, whether on stage or in dreams. In the end, the self-reflective Hollywood musical provided the most accommodating space for Levant to share his unruly talents.

## NOTES

1. "The Band Wagon," *Variety*, July 8, 1953, 6.
2. Levant and his commentators have joked about the miscasting in various locations, including Sheilah Graham, "Oscar Levant Worries He's Miscast as Himself," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 13, 1943, 12.
3. Jane Feuer, "The Self-Reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 2, no. 3 (1977): 315.
4. Feuer, "The Self-Reflective Musical," 318.
5. On the contradictory qualities of stardom, see Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1–16.
6. "Hollywood Gives Levant Leading Role," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 13, 1940, 14.
7. As Irene Kahn Atkins notes in an insightful review of Levant's films, "Oscar's personality varies from film to film, usually dependent on which studio produced his pictures." Irene Kahn Atkins, "The Image of Oscar," *Focus on Film* 30 (November 1978): 34.
8. Levant's quips are so abundant, they are a regular feature in commentaries on his life. The featuring of them here is an homage to Sam Kashner and Nancy Schoenberger's Levant biography, *A Talent for Genius: The Life and Times of Oscar Levant* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1994). Each chapter begins with a quote from Levant or one of his onscreen characters.
9. Kashner and Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius*, 11.
10. Kashner and Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius*, 41.

11. Gershwin's accompaniment for the show *Ladies First* is recalled by Levant in vivid detail in *A Smattering of Ignorance*: "[Nora Bayes's] singing was marked by a highly personal treatment of the music and words, in which the piano accompaniments played a very subtle and important part requiring almost constant improvisation. After one chorus of the first song my attention left Bayes and remained fixed on the playing of the pianist. I had never heard such fresh, brisk, unstudied, completely free and inventive playing—all within a consistent frame that set off her singing perfectly. Later when I reminded George of the show and his part in it he remarked that Bayes was constantly complaining that his playing distracted her from what she was trying to do." Oscar Levant, *A Smattering of Ignorance* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1940), 148.
12. Levant's recording of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and the expansion of his social network in New York is carefully documented in Kashner and Schoenberger's biography *A Talent for Genius*. See especially Part II, "The Emperors of Broadway," 27–80.
13. Levant's contributions as a songwriter for film are documented in Kashner and Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius*, 485–486. Select film titles to which Levant contributed songs include *Street Girl* (1929), *Jazz Heaven* (1929), *Love Comes Along* (1930), and *In Person* (1935).
14. Although not a feature, movie audiences did encounter Levant as "himself" in thirty-eight one-reeler editions of *Information, Please*, released between 1939 and 1942. Kashner and Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius*, 486.
15. Gary Giddins, *Bing Crosby: Swinging on a Star, The War Years, 1940–1946* (New York: Little Brown & Company, 2018), 56.
16. Levant's exuberant accompanimental style was developed in part under Zygmunt Stojowski's tutelage (Kashner and Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius*, 41). Another role model may have been Gershwin, whose distinctive accompaniment in the Broadway show *Ladies First* (1918) impressed a very young Levant. See Note 11.
17. Kashner and Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius*, 244.
18. Atkins, "The Image of Oscar," 37.
19. Kashner and Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius*, 211.
20. Walt., "Rhythm on the River," *Variety*, 21 August 1940, 18.
21. Their search parodies the real-life "search for Scarlett" that had dominated coverage of *Gone with the Wind* in the late 1930s.
22. The household employs a large, African American chorus that provides musical support but is compromised by a racially insensitive screenplay. The chorus strikes up a spirited round of "Dixie" as producer and composer run from the house.
23. The first passage is the opening of the Sarabande; the second passage is an extraordinarily brisk rendition of the rondeau theme from Passapied I. I am grateful to Edward Parmentier for identifying these passages.
24. "Book Oscar Levant for 31 Concert Dates; Pianist Also Does a Monolog," *Variety*, August 13, 1941, 1.
25. Not all of these recordings were released on albums. See *Rhapsody in Blue: The Extraordinary Life of Oscar Levant, His Complete Piano Recordings*, Sony Music Entertainment, 2018, 77.
26. Philip K. Scheuer, "Town Called Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 1941, 3.
27. Scheuer, "Town Called Hollywood."
28. Oscar Levant, *Memoirs of an Amnesiac* (Hollywood, CA: Samuel French, 1965), 147.
29. This particular visual device was used before in Warner Bros.' *Four Wives* (1939), when an image of Mickey Borden—a departed pianist and aspiring composer—is superimposed

over the image of a living pianist. John Garfield, who plays the Mickey character, had based his performance on Oscar Levant. See Kashner and Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius*, 206, where they discuss Garfield's performance in *Four Daughters* (1938), of which *Four Wives* is a sequel.

30. The soloist was Harry Kaufman, with Alexander Smallens conducting the orchestra. Ryan Paul Bañagale, *Arranging Gershwin: "Rhapsody in Blue" and the Creation of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 149.
31. Mark Shubart, "Gershwin Concert Packs the Stadium," *New York Times*, July 13, 1945, 16.
32. Ad reprinted in *Rhapsody in Blue: The Extraordinary Life of Oscar Levant, His Complete Piano Recordings*, Sony Music Entertainment, 2018, 29.
33. Kashner and Schoenberger note that working with the Arthur Freed Unit would be Levant's "most satisfying working relationship, producing three of his most successful films" (*A Talent for Genius*, 321).
34. One could make the case for *Romance on the High Seas* where he is nominally Doris Day's employer, but his unrequited love for her—frequently expressed to remind audiences of his ardor—suggests unsubtly that she holds the dominant position in their professional-personal relationship.
35. See "The Year's Top Selling Classical Artists over Retail Counters," *Billboard*, January 1, 1949, 19.
36. "Oscar Levant to Present 'Sabre Dance,' " *Musical Express*, September 24, 1948, 4.
37. *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949), Shooting Script, American Film Script Collection, Alexander Street Press, 19.
38. Levant purchased a country home in 1944, where he fought off anxiety attacks prompted by the sight and sound of local wildlife: "Even birds, with their restless flutterings, upset him." Kashner and Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius*, 284.
39. In the film's script, Levant's character was to have conducted the next musical number on the benefit program, a performance featuring Josh and Dinah together. Although the number selected for the film was Gershwin's "They Can't Take That Away from Me," Levant's conducting role was cut. *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949), Shooting Script, American Film Script Collection, Alexander Street Press, 89.
40. Mark Griffin, *A Hundred or More Hidden Things: The Life and Films of Vincente Minnelli* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2010), 28.
41. Vincente Minnelli in film commentary track, "By Strauss," *An American in Paris*, directed by Vincente Minnelli (1951; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010), DVD.
42. Richard Crawford, *Summertime: George Gershwin's Life in Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 452.
43. Both Levant and Saul Chaplin recall that Levant and Gene Kelly disagreed passionately over the rhythmic handling of the Viennese waltz afterbeat (Levant in favor, Kelly against). This devolved into shouting, threats of violence, and counter-threats of suing. The rehearsal ended with Levant leaving. The number was resumed the next day with no acknowledgment of the previous day's fiasco. See Saul Chaplin, *The Golden Age of Movie Musicals and Me* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1994), 133; Oscar Levant, *Memoirs of an Amnesiac* (Hollywood, CA: Samuel French, 1965), 200–201.
44. *An American in Paris: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, liner notes booklet (Los Angeles: Rhino Records, 1996), 39.
45. The 1922 song's lyrics are considerably revised and expanded for *American in Paris*.
46. *An American in Paris: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, liner notes booklet, 29.

47. Both "By Strauss" and "Tra-la-la" were originally sung by male-female couples in their original stage contexts. It is interesting to see how they are repurposed as male trios and duets, respectively, for *American in Paris*, a film unusual for having no songs for female characters.
48. As noted in the film's commentary track, it was Minnelli's idea to begin the scene with Adam struggling to solve a compositional problem. Minnelli had known Levant from his time as an aspiring composer. By the mid-1940s, Levant had set aside compositional ambitions. Hear commentary track for "Tra-la-la," *An American in Paris*, directed by Vincente Minnelli (1951; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010), DVD.
49. These may be heard on *An American in Paris: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* (Los Angeles: Rhino Records, 1996), 2 CDs.
50. Robin Wood, "Minnelli's *Madame Bovary*," in *Vincente Minnelli: The Art of Entertainment*, ed. Joe McElhaney (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 158.
51. This astonishing moment also has inter-filmic resonance with the aforementioned sequence in *Rhapsody in Blue*, when onscreen Levant applauds vigorously for a performance dubbed by Levant.
52. Even so, the generous attention to Levant in *American in Paris* did not preclude cuts to his performance. Saul Chaplin regretted that a serious scene between Levant and Nina Foch was cut from the film, as it showed "what a sensitive actor he could be" (Chaplin, *The Golden Age of Movie Musicals and Me*, 136).
53. Although *The I Don't Care Girl* fails at incorporating Levant's musical talents, the film does possess two of the strangest numbers from Levant's filmography. In one, Levant dons a flamboyant outfit to perform a backbeat-heavy mashup of Bach's Little Fugue in G Minor with Rossini's *Barber of Seville*. Levant later dismissed his films for Twentieth Century–Fox as "uninspired": "It was the only studio that made me adhere rigidly to the script" (*Memoirs of an Amnesiac*, 194).
54. Quoted in Kashner and Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius*, 337.
55. Kashner and Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius*, 335–337. Assessment of Levant's role in *The Band Wagon* might be different if the duet number "Sweet Music" were not cut. Similar to "What Would Shakespeare Have Said" and "Tra-la-la," the song places Levant in the role of accompanist, but allows him star-status privileges. Lily's lyric complains that her pianist partner is too swept up in his instrumental studies to support their life together. After assuring her that "our poverty will soon depart when I develop my art," Levant indulges in a series of style-hopping asides, including an extended digression on the finale of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1. The number is another joyously extended Levant specialty. (At four-and-a-half minutes in length, it would have been the second longest number following the twelve-minute "Girl Hunt Ballet.") Its removal from the film suggests that the novelty of creating Levant-centered musical novelties was beginning to wear thin for film executives. The recording of "Sweet Music" (Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz) is fortunately available on *The Band Wagon: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* (Los Angeles: Rhino Records, 1996). The author thanks Dominic Broomfield-McHugh for sharing this resource.
56. Quoted in Griffin, *A Hundred or More Hidden Things*, 160.
57. "Oscar Levant Suicide Report Held Mistake," *Los Angeles Times*, February 26, 1954, 7.
58. Kashner and Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius*, 355.
59. Kashner and Schoenberger, *A Talent for Genius*, 357.
60. Atkins, "The Image of Oscar," 39.

61. Virgil Thomson, "Levant Tough and Tender," in *Virgil Thomson, Music Chronicles: 1940–1954*, edited by Tim Page (New York: Library of America, 2014), 140. The column from which this quote is drawn was originally published February 18, 1942.
62. Howard Taubman, "American Music and Composers," *New York Times*, January 21, 1940, 85.
63. There are also indications of other films that incorporated Levant-like characters without casting Levant. Donald O'Connor's piano-playing Cosmo from *Singin' in the Rain* was originally conceived with Levant in mind. The character, as played by O'Connor, is a gentler version of the Levant "type" modeled in *An American in Paris*. William Baer, "*Singin' in the Rain*: A Conversation with Betty Comden and Adolph Green," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 11.
64. See, e.g., John Schaefer, "Michael Feinstein on Oscar Levant," *New Sounds*, accessed February 19, 2019, https://www.newsounds.org/story/michael-feinstein-oscar-levant/; Josh Getlin, "Remembering the Brilliant, Troubled Oscar Levant," *Los Angeles Times*, August 17, 2018, accessed February 19, 2019, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-oscar-levant-appreciation-20180817-story.html. Since the author completed writing this chapter, a substantial work of research on Levant has become available. For more historical context and analysis of Levant's career, see Caleb T. Boyd, "Oscar Levant: Pianist, Gershwinite, Middlebrow Media Star" (PhD diss., Washington University in St. Louis, 2020), Proquest (27833676).

## CHAPTER 16

# "HARD TO REPLACE"

## *The Shadow of Judy Garland and the Artistic Remarriage of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in* The Barkleys of Broadway

DOMINIC BROOMFIELD-MCHUGH

> "When it came time to start *Barkleys of Broadway* at M-G-M, I was disappointed to find that Judy Garland could not make it on account of illness. . . . The whole show having been written with Judy in mind, this situation presented a major problem."
>
> —Fred Astaire, *Steps in Time*, 294.

### INTRODUCTION: THE POLITICS OF AN ARTISTIC REMARRIAGE

When MGM's *The Barkleys of Broadway* opened in 1949, the film's producer Arthur Freed received numerous notes of approval from the general public, including the following:

> Congratulations on a job well done, seeing Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers back together again in a picture that will no doubt sweep the coast to coast, [*sic*] gives us all a little more faith in Hollywood.[1]
>
> Congratulations on the wonderful musical THE BARKLEYS OF BROADWAY starring the inimitable Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire which I have so far seen fourteen times . . . without a doubt, the best musical that I have ever seen. Astaire and Rogers are still and will always be Hollywood's greatest and most popular dance team.[2]

> . . . all in all one of the finest musicals I have ever seen on a screen. Astaire apparently is as invincible as is your taste and showmanship. Re-uniting him with Rogers and adding [Oscar] Levant, whose vitriolic humor fitted perfectly in character and situation, was damn astute construction. If "THE BARKLEYS" isn't a tremendous artistic as well as financial success we should all go into the delicatessen business.[3]

And despite some specific reservations, the critical response to the re-pairing of beloved song-and-dance team Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers a decade after their ninth and final film for RKO, *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939), was also overwhelmingly positive.[4] *The Barkleys* was their first film in color and the movie proved their enduring commercial appeal: according to Hugh Fordin, it made a healthy profit at the box office and provoked raves such as the ones reproduced above.[5]

Yet although it is obvious that the film needs to be read through the lens of the Astaire-Rogers partnership, the project was commissioned for a quite different pairing. Freed was so delighted by the combination of perhaps his two favorite performers, Astaire and Judy Garland, in *Easter Parade* (1948) that he immediately asked screenwriters Betty Comden and Adolph Green, who had enjoyed success at MGM with *Good News* (1947) and went on to write various other movies for the studio, to devise another film for Astaire and Garland as a rapid follow-up.[6] Garland's then-husband Vincente Minnelli remembers:

> *Easter Parade* . . . turned out to be such a huge hit that the studio insisted on re-teaming Judy and Fred. If delays and added expense had resulted from Judy's erratic behavior, they were forgotten. The millions being grossed at the box office saw to that.
>
> The new project was to be another story about a theatrical team, as *Easter Parade* had been, this time in a contemporary setting.[7]

Ultimately, exhaustion and medical problems caused Garland to be unreliable and therefore she was removed from the project—physically, at least—and replaced by Rogers. In itself, this was hardly unprecedented: stars would be shifted around when production times changed. Yet Garland's impact on the writing of the screenplay and score of *The Barkleys of Broadway* was too dominant simply to be written out, leaving the movie with an interesting patina of two especially potent combinations: Astaire-Garland, the popular partnership of the previous year's hit, and Astaire-Rogers, the much-missed favorite team of the 1930s. In this chapter, I use archival production sources to consider how the finished movie reflects several competing tensions that the screenwriters, composer, lyricist, and production team had to address as a result of abruptly transforming a movie intended for one stellar partnership into a vehicle for another. I also consider how the use of what Stanley Cavell calls a "remarriage plot" ostensibly suited the Astaire-Rogers combination better than the Astaire-Garland one but—like the movie as a whole—has been distractingly misread as a conscious satire of the real-life relationship of Astaire and Rogers.

## "You Made Me Love You": An Astaire-Garland Sequel

The initial intention was to name the second Astaire-Garland movie *You Made Me Love You* in reference to Garland's celebrated performance of the song of the same name (by producer and lyricist Arthur Freed and his regular collaborator, the composer Nacio Herb Brown) from *Broadway Melody of 1938*. This was the title on screenplay drafts from May to early June 1948, as well as on the report from the Production Code Administration's censor on June 10. The studio thought better of the name because of the cost involved in such use ($10,000),[8] and made the change to *The Barkleys of Broadway* on June 7,[9] but it would not be the last time on this movie that a well-established song by writers other than the film's main composer and lyricist, Harry Warren and Ira Gershwin, would be used to create a curious metatextual reference to the real-life star's/stars' careers, as we will see below.

As Minnelli noted, the new film was engineered to be a metaphorical sequel to *Easter Parade*, bringing about situations, routines, settings, numbers, and characters that would showcase Garland and Astaire as superstars in equivalent ways to their previous outing. Indeed, it is interesting that Philip Furia perceives that the challenge of that previous outing, *Easter Parade*, was to create a film that *moved away* from the Astaire-Rogers model: he claims that two songs from Irving Berlin's score for *Easter Parade*, "It Only Happens When I Dance with You" and "A Couple of Swells," "performed the seemingly impossible task of exorcising the ghost of Ginger Rogers, which had haunted Astaire for nearly ten years."[10] But he forgets that *Easter Parade* was written for Gene Kelly, whom Astaire agreed to replace at short notice due to injury, so if the movie is successful in moving Astaire on from the style of his RKO films, it is by coincidence rather than design.

Likewise, the respects in which *The Barkleys* seems like a tailored fit for Astaire and Rogers distort the fact that the movie was actually designed for the Astaire-Garland combination—and because the screenplay was only partly rewritten after Garland's departure, the finished film does not cover up its origins with Garland and specifically with *Easter Parade*. This is the case particularly because of two plot points. First, *The Barkleys* picks up the central theme of *Easter Parade*, in which Astaire's character molds Garland's chorine into a star. Although Astaire's character ultimately backs down and allows Garland's to be herself, the Pygmalion-Galatea motif is explicit. This is picked up in *The Barkleys*, in which the lead characters, Broadway stars Josh and Dinah, constantly bicker because Josh is Dinah's director as well as her costar, and acts as her "creator." The movie explores whether Dinah can survive professionally without Josh's guidance, and implies that she can't—and in one deliberately humorous scene, the analogy to Svengali and Trilby is taken to the extreme when the Barkleys attend the unveiling of a portrait in their honor, consisting of a frying pan in the shape of Josh's head with Dinah's profile in the form of a pancake "molded by Josh" inside it.

The theme is taken up during one of the Barkleys' many arguments in the screenplay too, when Josh says Dinah "couldn't walk across the stage" without him and that he "molded" Dinah "like Svengali did Trilby." As it happens, this fed into a general perception about Astaire's relationship with Rogers that irritated the actress: she commented that "The general public thought he was a Svengali, who snapped his fingers for his little Trilby to obey; in their eyes, my career was his creation. It just so happens that when Fred and I came together for the first time in *Flying Down to Rio*, it was his *second* film and my *twentieth*. . . . Fred and I were colleagues."[11] But the significance of this aspect of the plot of the film is actually to keep alive the Pygmalion-Galatea theme of *Easter Parade*, not to create a metatextual comment on the Astaire-Rogers off-screen relationship.

The other broad aspect of the film in which the casting of Garland influenced the content is the nature of the metatheatrical theme of the plot. On the one hand, the show that the Barkleys are performing in (*Manhattan Downbeat*) is a revue, which facilitated the continuation of the stylistic world of "A Couple of Swells" from *Easter Parade*, while the non-musical play that Dinah goes to perform in without Josh was an opportunity for Garland to have fun impersonating Sarah Bernhardt. Again, it is obvious why the part broadly worked for Rogers too, with her background in musical comedy and her subsequent Academy Award–winning successes in non-musical film, but again it is undeniable that Garland's "star text" is locked into the movie even when she is physically absent.

Just as these aspects of the Svengali theme and the theatrical setting were ways of reviving ideas that had worked well in *Easter Parade*, the unusual decision to have Astaire and Garland begin the movie as a married couple was an opportunity to do something different. In fact, it may be the most successful, indeed ingenious, attempt to address the age gap between Astaire and one of his post-RKO costars: the Barkleys are already married so Astaire would not have had to court Garland in the film (the courtship is obviously the most jarring aspect of many of these films from Astaire's late career). Although Josh and Dinah Barkley are not literally Don Hewes and Hannah Brown, *The Barkleys* would no doubt have felt like a continuation of Don and Hannah's story from *Easter Parade*, an impression supported by the Broadway setting, revue-style numbers, bickering, and fractious Svengali theme.

## SONGS FOR JUDY

Harry Warren and Ira Gershwin tend to be admonished for their work on the score of *The Barkleys of Broadway*. Ginger Rogers is among the detractors, reporting on her first hearing of the music: "They played the whole score for me and I was a little disappointed."[12] John Mueller is more damning, declaiming that "In one important area, *The Barkleys of Broadway* is inferior not only to the Astaire-Rogers vehicles of the 1930s but also to virtually every other film Astaire ever made—the music"; later, he refers to "Warren's uncharacteristically uninspired score."[13] Mueller's view is representative of most of the critical responses to the movie; indeed, Michael Feinstein describes how even the screenwriters felt this way: "On one nostalgia-infused night I played songs from the score of *Barkleys* for Comden and Green and they sat in stone-faced and silent disapproval with each rendering from the film. Forty years on, and they still hated the score."[14]

But aside from the hyperbole of these opinions, they do not take into account the team's other songs for the movie, most of which were written for Garland with or without Astaire, and were dropped along the way. For example, it would have given the picture a lift to have included "The Poetry of Motion," a smart number that was intended to poke fun at Agnes de Mille's then-recent work on Broadway as a choreographer from the ballet world (e.g. in *Oklahoma!*, 1943, *Carousel*, 1945, and *Brigadoon*, 1947). Gershwin's lyric begins the verse by declaring, "All the traffic cops are pirouetting,/Bus conductors leap in the air for dimes" (rhyming with "Ballet is the spirit of the times"), set to an angular "leaping" vocal line by Warren. The opening of the refrain (see Figure 16.1) then mixes unexpected major seventh and diminished seventh chords that communicate the satirical tone of the lyrics. The song was still included on the estimated budget for the movie dated 18 August 1948,[15] a month after Rogers joined the film, so perhaps it was cut because of the high projected cost of shooting the number ($104,304, the fourth highest of the numbers in the movie).

Perhaps the biggest loss from the score was "There Is No Music," a torchy, elegiac ballad in G minor that would have been the perfect vehicle for Garland's talents (following on from "Better Luck Next Time" in *Easter Parade*). As Figure 16.2 shows, the number's harmonic structure emphasizes a sequence of haunting appoggiatura figures (e.g., on "glisten," "listen," and "music") that underline the poignancy of the lyric. The number's deletion from the film is truly a shame: although it is understandable that it was not assigned to Rogers, whose vocal prowess was obviously inferior to Garland's, the sheer quality of this number would have lifted the overall quality of the score as a whole and given Warren and Gershwin's work on the movie a stronger reputation. (Edward Jablonski rightly refers to the song as "impressive" and notes that the lyric "sings like the poetry Ira maintained he never wrote").[16] Aside from that, the deletion of the number, without any equivalent or replacement, leaves Rogers/Dinah without a solo, and therefore without the opportunity to express any emotion about how she feels about her separation from Astaire/Josh (the biggest plot point). Indeed, "There Is No Music," with its theme of loss, would have been inarguably the score's best moment of alignment with the separation/remarriage plot.

Two other dropped songs sit more conventionally in the general showbiz world of the film and were obviously designed as numbers for the show-within-the-film. "These Days" seems particularly redolent of the jokey vaudeville slapstick of "A Couple of Swells." If, as seems obvious, it was written for the opening of the film (the studio score is dated April 13, 1948, so it predates Garland's departure from the project by many months), it was obviously intended to act as a visual cue to the audience that Astaire and Garland were back in their *Easter Parade* personae. The musically conventional

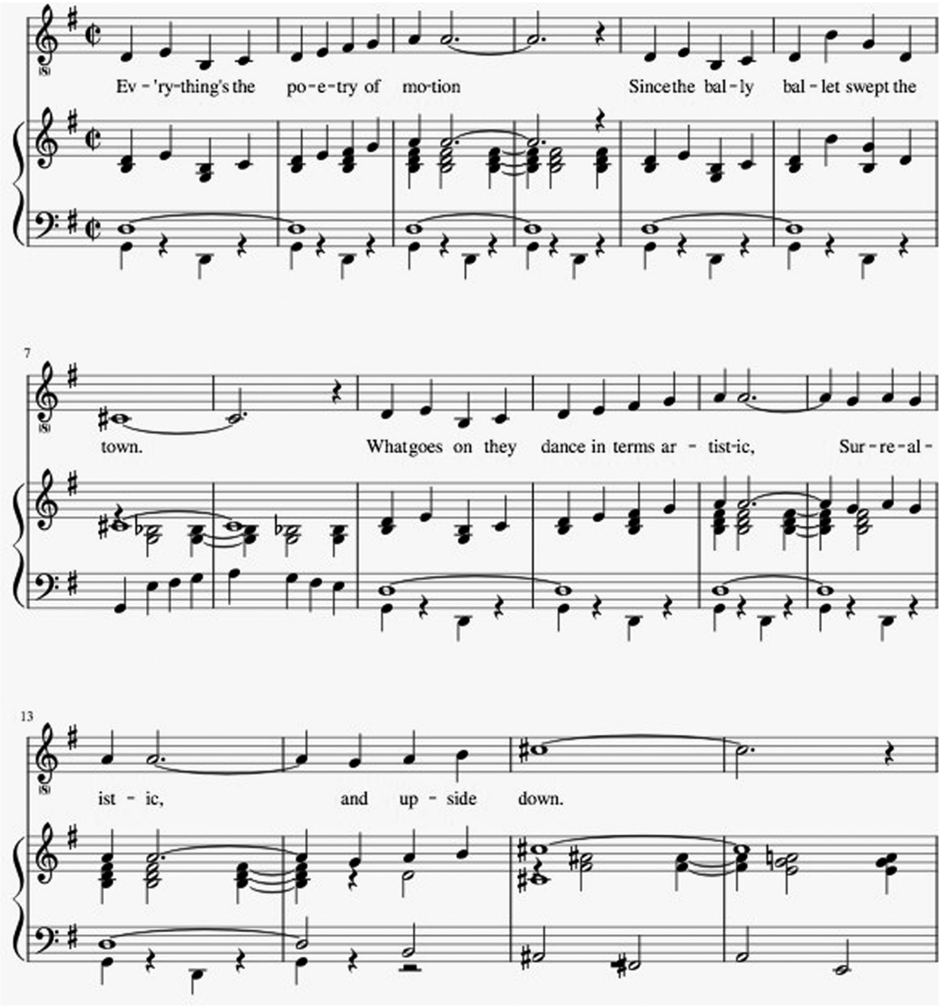
Ev - 'ry-thing's the po-e-try of mo-tion Since the bal-ly bal-let swept the
7
town. What goes on they dance in terms ar - tist-ic, Sur-re-al-
13
ist - ic, and up - side down.

**FIGURE 16.1** "The Poetry of Motion," excerpt from refrain. Copyright by Harry Warren Music, Inc./Four Jays Music Co. Reproduced with permission.

aspects of the song (e.g., a thumbline, the cakewalk style) actually serve its function well as an uproarious opening number; it is clear from the lyric that it was supposed to be the opener of the fictional *Manhattan Downbeat* in which the Barkleys are appearing. Gershwin's lyric begins by listing the contradictions of the modern world ("Though the traffic's overflowing, / No one knows quite where he's going") before the final phrase advocates that the audience immerse itself in the carefree abandon of the show ("So let's forget these days tonight"; see Figure 16.3). At the other end of the film, the original closing number, "Call on Us Again," has an unusual chromatic contrary-motion structure (see Figure 16.4) and is in the same uptempo vaudevillian style. In terms of syntax, these numbers bookended the movie as originally written with a clear depiction of the same theatrical world as *Easter Parade*.

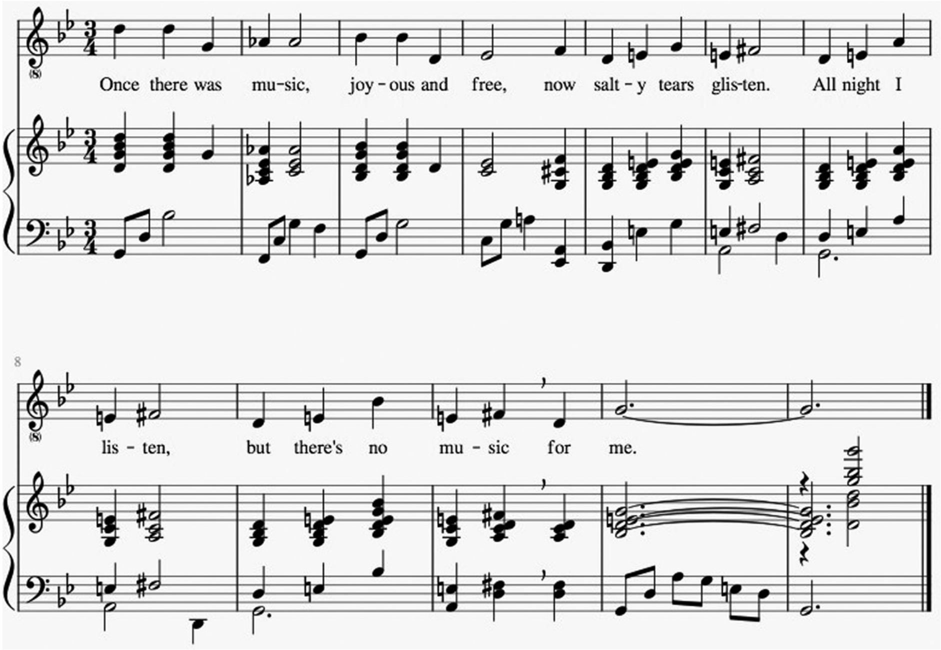
8
Once there was mu-sic, joy-ous and free, now salt-y tears glis-ten. All night I
lis-ten, but there's no mu-sic for me.

FIGURE 16.2 "There is No Music," end of refrain. Copyright by Harry Warren Music, Inc./Four Jays Music Co. Reproduced with permission.

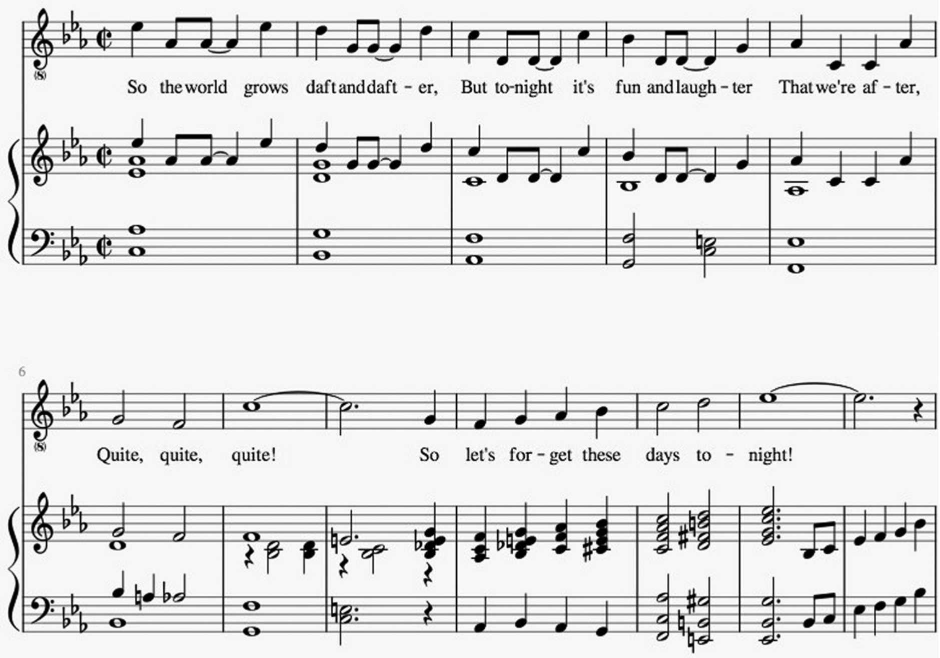
6
So the world grows daft and daft-er, But to-night it's fun and laugh-ter That we're af-ter,
Quite, quite, quite! So let's for-get these days to-night!

FIGURE 16.3 Excerpt from "These Days." Copyright by Harry Warren Music, Inc./Four Jays Music Co. Reproduced with permission.

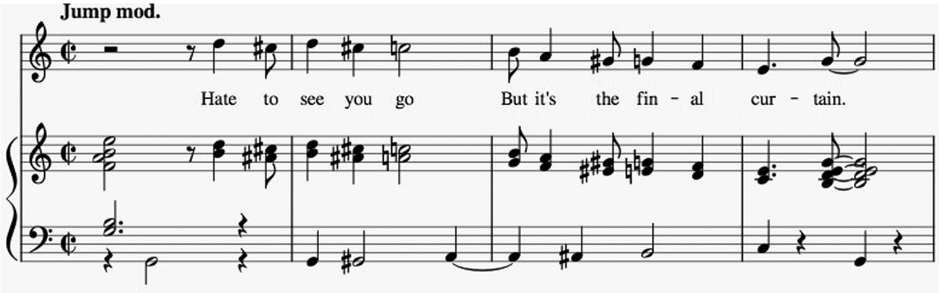

FIGURE 16.4 Beginning of refrain of "Call On Us Again." Copyright by Harry Warren Music, Inc./Four Jays Music Co. Reproduced with permission.

There were two other such numbers too, and these appear to have been retained for some months after Rogers took over from Garland. In an article from November 5, 1948, over three months into Rogers's work on the film, the *Musical Express* reported that MGM had confirmed that there would be nine new songs in *The Barkleys*, including a song-and-dance duet for Astaire and Rogers called "The Courtin' of Elmer and Ella" and a solo for Rogers titled "Natchez on the Mississip'."[17] The first of these was a lengthy routine—ten pages of piano-vocal score compared to the three or four of most of the score's songs—and falls into the subgenre of one of Ira Gershwin's satirical "saga" songs (e.g., "The Saga of Jenny" from *Lady in the Dark*).[18] This hillbilly number (complete with yodeling) about a fiery courtship that ends in murder would certainly have been an occasion for humor that would have suited the Astaire and Garland of "A Couple of Swells," and seems an especial loss to the film (see Figure 16.5 for an indication of the tongue-in-cheek tone of the number). In a similar mode, "Natchez on the Mississip'" was a parody of songs about (and longing for) the South, providing Gershwin with the challenge of finding words that rhyme with "Natchez" (he used "latches," "batches," "patches," "hatches," and "snatches").

Two final casualties to the score affected ballad duets for the Barkleys. The song "Taking No Chances on You," the lyrics for which are reproduced in *The Complete Lyrics of Ira Gershwin* and the music for which Michael Feinstein remembers seeing among Warren's manuscripts,[19] was a tender love duet with chromatic harmonies and a lyric that reflected the special love of a long-married couple ("I'd be lost if I should lose you—that's why I'm / Holding on day and night"). Quite where it sits in the genesis of the film's production is unclear but it certainly has few equals in the released film's score and furthermore offered a crucial further integrated or "book" number in a movie dominated by songs from the show-within-the-film. In the same category of ballad duet, "Hard to Replace" actually appears in the released movie, but it was originally planned as an Astaire-Garland duet, as the music sources in the MGM collection at USC prove. Again, this was a missed opportunity for the Barkleys to sing another duet, and one that actually addressed their relationship. In summary, the change of lead actress significantly affected the content of the score and therefore the reputation of Warren and Gershwin's work on it.

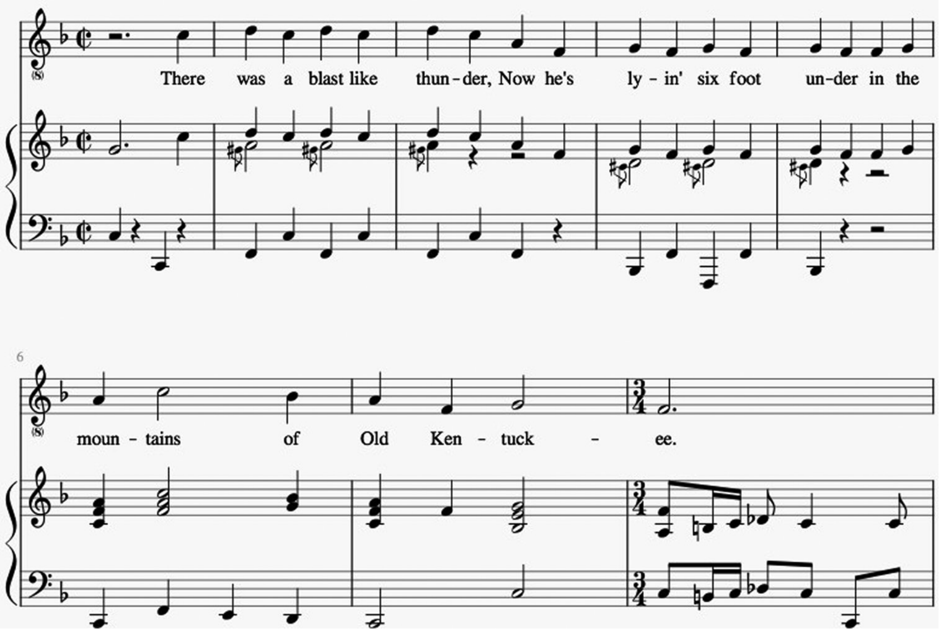
There was a blast like thun-der, Now he's ly - in' six foot un-der in the
6
moun - tains of Old Ken - tuck - ee.

**FIGURE 16.5** Conclusion of the fourth chorus of "The Courtin' of Elmer and Ella." Copyright by Harry Warren Music, Inc./Four Jays Music Co. Reproduced with permission.

## The Replacement of Garland with Rogers

It is well known that Garland had to drop out of the film due to illness and exhaustion. According to Scott Schechter's *Judy Garland: The Day-by-Day Chronicle of a Legend*, rehearsals started on June 14 and the actress successfully reported for work for most of the first two weeks of preparation, missing only June 21 and 22 because of illness. But after the rehearsal on June 28, she would complete no further work on the picture apart from a single wardrobe fitting on July 1.[20] Table 16.1 outlines the process by which Garland had to be removed from the picture: the assistant director's reports show that she kept phoning in sick to miss rehearsals and wardrobe fittings. Hugh Fordin reproduces a memo from Arthur Freed in which he records a conversation with Garland's physician: "[Dr. Schelman] said that she possibly could work four or five days, always under medication, and possibly blow up for a period and then work again for a few days. He was of the opinion that if she didn't have to work for a while it might not be too difficult to make a complete cure but that her knowledge of having to report every morning would cause such a mental disturbance within her that the results would be in jeopardy."[21] Garland was removed from the picture on July 17 and on July 19 Ginger Rogers started work.

### Table 16.1 Summary of Memos in the Arthur Freed Collection at USC, Mainly from Hugh Boswell to Fred Datig, Copied to Freed

**June 22, 1948**

At approximately 12:45 p.m. on this date, Judy Garland phoned Mr. Worsley to say that she was still ill and would not be able to come in for dance rehearsal. Garland's rehearsal call was for 1:30 p.m.

**June 30, 1948**

Garland had a fitting call in wardrobe at 11 a.m.

She phoned assistant director, Mr Worsley, at 9:40 a.m. to report that she had a slight attack of intestinal flu. Not too bad, but bad enough so that she would not be able to come and still be able to make her broadcast tonight.

**July 6, 1948**

Garland was called for a wardrobe fitting at 11 a.m.

At approximately 10:20 a.m she phoned wardrobe department and had fitting postponed until 2:30 this afternoon.

At 11:45 a.m. she called wardrobe department again, to say that she had a sick friend, and could not come in at all today.

**July 8, 1948**

Garland was called for an 11:00 a.m. fitting in Wardrobe.

At 10:40 a.m. her secretary called Wardrobe, who had the call transferred to Hugh Boswell. Garland's secretary informed him that Garland was ill, and would not be in today.

**July 9, 1948**

Garland had a call at 2:30 p.m. for a wardrobe fitting.

At approximately 11:45 a.m. she called Freed's office to say that she had had to go to the doctor's last evening, and would not be in today.

**July 10, 1948**

Garland had a call for a wardrobe fitting at 11 a.m.

At 9:20 a.m. her secretary phoned Mr. Ryan today that she was very ill, and would not be able to come in. However, she hoped to be able to come in on Monday.

**July 12, 1948**

Garland had a wardrobe fitting call for 10 a.m.

She called Freed's office at approximately 9:20 a.m. to say that she would not be in.

**July 13–17, 1948**

Assistant directors' reports—in an unmarked folder—show that Garland wasn't called (but was still not dismissed) from July 13 to 17. On July 17 she "closed" on the picture.

**July 19, 1948**

Memo detailing Ginger Rogers's terms on August 27 states that she commenced services on July 19.

In her autobiography, Rogers explains how she was called by an executive from MGM asking whether she would have any objections to doing another film with Astaire, a question that she says irritated her: "We had parted as friends and maintained a cordial, if distant, relationship. . . . In the past, I had wanted to do something on my own, but never anything against Fred—ever. . . . The next thing I heard, it was a fait accompli and I was going to make another film with Fred. I was delighted!"[22] Astaire's explanation of how it came about is similarly positive ("Luck was with us, however, and Ginger Rogers happened to be available. Gin and I had often discussed the possibility of getting together for a rematch"),[23] but Brent Phillips reports director Charles Walters's experience that Astaire "complained about [Rogers] incessantly."[24] It is not clear if the feeling was mutual, but Rogers wrote a telegram to Freed early in the process that seems to express enthusiasm: "I HOPE THE BARKLEYS OF BROADWAY IS A HUGE SUCCESS[.] GUESS WHO HOPES SO/GINGER."[25]

Whether the stars were pleased or indifferent about their rematch, there is no doubt that it was a coup for MGM to reunite such a popular team, and the studio quickly started taking steps to exploit the opportunity. For example, a memo dated July 27—just a week after the start of Rogers's contract—asked Freed's deputy, Roger Edens, whether "in looking for a number for Fred Astaire and Miss Rogers which might be reminiscent, have you considered 'I'VE GOT MY EYES ON YOU,' which was used in BROADWAY MELODY OF 1940[?]," adding: "P.S. This song will cost us nothing."[26] The decision had been made to use an existing song for the climactic scene in which the now-parted Barkleys are tricked into performing together at a charity benefit, and MGM tried to encourage Freed and Edens to use a piece that the studio already owned. But by early August, they had decided to acquire the rights to use George and Ira Gershwin's "They Can't Take That Away from Me," which had first been introduced in the Astaire-Rogers movie *Shall We Dance* in 1937. In that original performance, Astaire sang it to Rogers in a static scene and there was no dancing, so it would be a real occasion to have them repeat the song in a more choreographic setting. The decision was costly, with MGM having to pay the publisher Chappell $12,500 to use it.[27] Harry Warren was bitter about the decision to supplement his score with a song by the late George Gershwin: "I didn't take kindly to this—not that I didn't like the song, but there isn't a composer alive who likes having a song by someone else interpolated into his score," he commented.[28]

## The Problems of *The Barkleys of Broadway* as an Astaire-Rogers Vehicle

Freed and Edens's willingness to invest in the nostalgic touch of having Astaire and Rogers reprise one of their old numbers in Technicolor showed that they realized the need to make some adaptations now that a different star pairing was at the head of the cast. At the same time, this move centered nostalgia as the film's problem: by encouraging audiences and critics to look back at the 1930s Fred and Ginger through this number, MGM drew attention to the things that had changed. This has invited almost consistently negative comparisons ever since, a blunt example being Arlene Croce's appraisal of "They Can't Take That Away": "neither the choreography nor the performance is what it might have been in 1937. The stylistic echoes—the walking side by side, the darting and swaying, the turbulence and the calm withdrawal—are so much passionless technique, and Rogers had taken on a muscular thickness in her back and arms that robs her gestures of their former beautiful transparency."[29]

Although Croce goes on to specify the ages of both performers (Rogers was thirty-eight, Astaire was fifty), it is impossible to ignore the sense of misogyny in her and others' focus on how the passage of time had affected Rogers's body rather than Astaire's. But this emphasis on how Ginger's body had changed also hints at what works and doesn't work about this number—and the film's songs in general. Rogers's acting performance in the number could hardly be more expressive, and Conrad Sallinger's remarkable arrangement and orchestration (with its hints of *Rhapsody in Blue*) at least take the sound world of the number into the 1940s MGM musical rather than the 1930s RKO pictures of the earlier Astaire-Rogers collaborations. But these features do little to mask us from watching the performers *as Fred and Ginger* rather than as Josh and Dinah. It is a matter of opinion whether the suspension of disbelief is ordinarily vital or not for the audience of a musical, but this particular number goes beyond teasing us: arguably, it actually forces us to *suspend* the suspension of disbelief and instead focus on the strongly telegraphed experience of Astaire and Rogers in their familiar garb, performing in their familiar ballroom style for the first time in the movie (if we discount "The Swing Trot," which occurs under the opening titles), singing and dancing to a familiar song that was written for one of their familiar older movies.

In all of this, MGM was of course creating a *coup de théâtre*, evoking a jewel from Hollywood's past but this time in Technicolor. But it also does a disservice to Astaire and Rogers, because despite being the climactic number of the film, it prevented them from being creative at exactly the narrative moment when their best films of the 1930s tended to achieve the sublime through novelty—it should be a successor to "Cheek to Cheek" (*Top Hat*), "Never Gonna Dance" (*Swing Time*), and "Let's Face the Music and Dance" (*Follow the Fleet*), but offers them no such scope. That is not their fault, and regardless of Croce's comments, Astaire's choreography succeeds in achieving a sensuous mood. Either he or Robert Alton (credited with staging the musical numbers) is particularly clever at trying to draw the number back into the narrative of the film near the end of the dance too: after the tumultuous last hearing of the orchestral version of the bridge in the dance music, the texture of the music abruptly thins and there is a cut to a close-up of Astaire and Rogers standing still, staring into each other's eyes as their arms slowly drop. Rogers is particularly expressive in communicating the poignancy of the moment: the song occurs near the end of the film at a charity gala, when Oscar Levant's character (Ezra) has tricked Josh and Dinah into appearing together without their realizing that they will both be there. In this moment, the number finally becomes about Josh and Dinah's reunion in the narrative "present," but the rest of the sequence is about the past, and therefore about Fred and Ginger and their former selves.

The rest of the score does not, of course, make this sort of direct reference to the external environment of the stars' earlier careers, but it does feel as if the film presented a dilemma for the hard-working and blameless Astaire and Rogers: numbers that subtly refer back to their former work together invite negative comparisons, while numbers that lie outside their conventional frames of reference seem incoherent with the Astaire-Rogers magic. It is difficult to agree with Martha P. Nochimson's assessment that "This film is basically a series of allusions to the Astaire/Rogers past"[30] because, as we have seen, most of it was broadly written as an allusion to the more recent Astaire/Garland past (a specific allusion since this amounted only to *Easter Parade*). "My One and Only Highland Fling" is a good example: despite the charm that Astaire and Rogers bring to it, the number is not sophisticated enough to show them off to their best, and the potential for choreography is limited. Garland's broader brand of humor would have been much more effective here. Other numbers such as the energetic and spontaneous "Bouncin' the Blues" and the undeniably charming "Swing Trot" are much more suited to their abilities, but the former is rendered a little anonymous by the lack of vocals (Todd Decker provides a detailed analysis in his landmark monograph *Music Makes Me*)[31] while the latter's unusual relegation to behind the opening titles and weak lyric[32] (with its clumsy reference back to *Swing Time*) do little to showcase what Astaire and Rogers still have to offer.

## The Narrative of Remarriage

Perhaps the biggest irony of *The Barkleys of Broadway* is that the plot and screenplay *appear* to suit Astaire and Rogers so well that it is easy to overlook the fact that they do not serve them very well as performers at all. Nochimson notes this failing of the material and puts it down to what she terms the film's "formulaic narrative," but in my view this irony is thanks to Fred and Ginger themselves: they were both capable actors, and they throw themselves so fully into their roles that their performances are almost too believable, as if they are playing themselves. As we have seen above, this played into the rumors about the real-life relationship between Astaire and Rogers, further validating the impression that the film suits them well—plus, the fact that most of the songs are not integrated into the plot (and are therefore mostly there for extranarrative diversion) reinforces the emphasis on the screenplay as the film's center of gravity, rather than the musical numbers (an inversion of the balance of emphasis that made the RKO Astaire-Rogers films successful).

Stanley Cavell's monograph *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* is helpful in contextualizing *Barkleys* because it reveals how Hollywood in this period (1934–1949) was preoccupied with plots about formerly married couples getting back together; indeed, Cavell asserts that "this group of films is the principal group of Hollywood comedies after the advent of sound."[33] In the introduction to the book, he provides "the general construction of the myth [of the comedy of remarriage]":

> A running quarrel is forcing apart a pair who recognize themselves as having known one another forever. . . . This naturally presents itself as their having shared childhood together, suggesting they are brother and sister. They have discovered their sexuality together and find themselves required to enter the social realm, as if the sexual and the social are to legitimize one another. This is the beginning of history, of an unending quarrel. The joining of the sexual and the social is called marriage. Something evidently internal to the task of marriage causes trouble in paradise—as if marriage, which was to be a ratification, is itself in need of ratification. So marriage has its disappointment.[34]

Cavell goes on to describe how "upon separation, the woman tries a regressive tack, usually that of accepting as a husband a simpler, or mere, father-substitute" and continues: "And let us assume that the quarrel is going to have to take up questions about who is active and who is passive, and about who is awake, and about what happiness is and whether one can change."[35]

Through this, and his wider discussion of films such as *It Happened One Night*, *The Philadelphia Story*, and *His Girl Friday*, Cavell helps us to understand that *The Barkleys of Broadway* was aligned with a strong canon of comedy forebears that explored the nature of marriage, what brings people together, what pulls them apart, and how an act of catharsis might reunite them. To these we might add a prominent Broadway musical that Comden and Green almost certainly cannot have known when they first wrote *Barkleys* in March to May 1948 but was being written at the same time and has remarkable overlaps: *Kiss Me, Kate*, which opened in December 1948. Like Josh and Dinah Barkley, Fred Graham and Lilli Vanessi have known each other since their youth, were married, and could not stop bickering. Unlike the Barkleys, Fred and Lilli are divorced, but *Kate* depicts the working out of their differences through Lilli's demonstration of her agency (by going off to Hollywood), something Dinah Barkley also does in her way (by appearing in a non-musical play on her own). Fred and Josh both make it clear that they think their respective partners belong in the theater and with them—artistic and personal marriage are inextricably interlocked—and the two stories engage with how the lead woman demonstrates both romantic and professional independence from the lead man, a cathartic act that then allows them to reunite ("remarry") but on more equal terms now that Fred/Josh has learned to respect Lilli/Dinah.

Yet *Barkleys* is no equal to *Kate*, partly because Josh continues to pull Dinah's strings behind the scenes, secretly impersonating the director of the non-musical play she has left *Manhattan Downbeat* to appear in; she is struggling in rehearsals for the play until Josh starts calling Dinah on the phone, pretending to be the play's director Jacques Barredout, to offer advice to help her become a hit. That Dinah does become a hit in a non-musical property demonstrates that she has greater abilities than Josh has always implied, but her reliance on his direction limits her power. Arguably, this is a greater problem when Rogers is playing the role than might have been the case had Garland played the role as planned: like the other proto-feminist, strong leading women that Cavell discusses (Katharine Hepburn, Irene Dunne, Rosalind Russell, Barbara Stanwyck) but unlike Garland at this point in her career, Rogers is plainly sophisticated and mature in the film. Whereas this fully tallies with Dinah's decision to leave Josh, it does not cohere with her sudden decision to revert to passiveness at the end of the film, especially in the face of enormous professional success. Josh's help may have contributed to Dinah's ability to achieve that success, but his help was sneaky; and not only was her success hers to be proud of, it confirmed that the potential Barredout saw in her (and which Josh did not see in her) was entirely valid. Astaire and Rogers do their best with the dialogue Comden and Green provide them with in the crucial scene of their reconciliation, but acting cannot overcome the anti-feminist stance that Dinah's decision to leave musical comedy for non-musical theater was nothing but folly.

## Rewriting the Film for Rogers

It is, of course, subjective to say that the conclusion of the film would have been less of a problem for Garland than it was for Rogers: she too was a strong presence on screen, and the ending would still have shown a frustratingly passive Dinah, regardless of who played her. Yet the age gap—Rogers (thirty-seven during filming) was eleven years older than Garland (twenty-six during filming)—and star texts clearly made a difference. Most of the characters played by Rogers in her RKO films with Astaire were assertive and/or had economic power: she plays a woman of means in films like *The Gay Divorcee*, *Top Hat*, and *Carefree*, and she is a professional dance teacher in *Swing Time*. This aligns her with exactly the kinds of independent-minded women that Cavell outlines in *Pursuits of Happiness*: assertive women who took part in "the struggle . . . for the reciprocity of equality of consciousness between a woman and a man."[36] Cavell identifies the lead women in this genre of 1930s movies as bridging the gap between the more famous landmarks in feminism—women's suffrage in the 1920s and the developments of the 1960s—and Rogers's status in most of her RKO movies with Astaire (and for that matter, various of her RKO movies without Astaire) explains her star text as a strong woman of quite some agency. By comparison, Garland was still young, if always feisty: despite her underrated performance in the non-musical film *The Clock* (1945), her movies up to *Barkleys* consistently found her playing impetuous, passionate characters in their early adulthood (e.g., in *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *The Harvey Girls*). Moreover, the presentation of Rogers with Astaire, as opposed to Garland with Astaire, set up an expectation about their screen dynamic and personae: whereas the Garland of *Easter Parade* (to which *Barkleys* was a follow-up) was decidedly younger and inexperienced compared to Astaire, the Rogers of the RKO films was closer in age and decidedly equal to him in screen power (if not dancing ability). It seems entirely reasonable that "Rogers as Dinah" could go off and have a career in non-musical film; and it seems entirely reasonable that "Garland as Dinah" would rely on Astaire/Josh as a much more experienced performer.

That the change of casting had an impact on the writing of the screenplay can be straightforwardly confirmed by the fact that changes were made after Rogers was hired. In other words, it is not merely imagination to perceive that Garland and Rogers had "star texts" or came with expectations and reputations that needed to be considered. A good example comes early on in the movie, after the opening number and opening night speeches. Josh and Dinah are in a limousine on the way to the opening night party. In drafts of the film dated before Rogers joined the film, this was a much longer piece of dialogue in which the two characters allude to the fact that they are always bickering, specifically apologizing to each other about rows they had in the out-of-town tryouts for *Manhattan Downbeat* (called *All Around the Town* in the March 1948 drafts). In a first subtle but important difference, the screenplay for the Garland version notes that Josh "lean[s] over and put[s] up the jump seat" then on his first line "Allow me, madame," he "picks her feet up and puts them on seat."[37] In the film as released, he instead offers her (i.e., now Rogers) his arm, and they cuddle while continuing the conversation.

The gesture itself highlights the difference between the actresses: in the Astaire-Garland version, Astaire is gentlemanly but is not tactile with Garland; in the Astaire-Rogers version, we see the beloved team in their first intimate scene in their first film in ten years, snuggled up like a long-married couple. There is then a significant portion of dialogue deleted from the Rogers version:

> DINAH (SERIOUS): You know, Josh, I'd like to apologize for the way I behaved in Boston. Making such a fuss just because you wanted to take one of my lines away. Oh, I was awful.
> JOSH (BENEVOLENTLY): Forget it, honest.
> DINAH: But I did break a jar of cold cream over your head.
> JOSH: So you did. Oh well, that line seemed important at the time. I can understand how you felt. (A LITTLE HESITANTLY:) Uh—now that we're on the subject—I have a few apologies to make myself—that time I got so mad in Baltimore—
> DINAH (AMUSEDLY): Oh yes, what had I done!
> JOSH (GRINNING): You—you couldn't remember the name of the laundry you sent all my shirts to.
> DINAH (THINKING BACK): Oh, darling, that wasn't Baltimore, that was—uh—
> JOSH (TRYING TO REMEMBER): I screamed at you for four days.
> DINAH (ALSO TRYING TO REMEMBER): And I got hysterical—and you threw me under the shower.
> JOSH (CONTINUING): And then when you bit my wrist, I gave you a bloody nose.
> DINAH (REMEMBERING HAPPILY): Oh, that was Philadelphia—the City of Brotherly Love. (*They laugh*)

Writing this material for Garland and Astaire, Comden and Green clearly had in mind the sort of broad comedy that they were known for as a team and from which Astaire and

Garland had created their chemistry in *Easter Parade*. But these descriptions of physical violence would never do for Rogers and Astaire. Theirs is a more tender, adult chemistry, as seen from the change in gesture described above, and so the dialogue is trimmed to make only vague reference to the "silly little rows" they had in rehearsal and on the road. Instead, the scene is now about Dinah's sensitive reaction to Josh's ill-timed reference to a criticism he has of her performance in one scene, leading the pair to arrive at the party at loggerheads with one another. In Rogers's onscreen performance, the pair have a genuine row, and she sobs; in the complete dialogue as originally conceived, it is clear that the Barkleys' disagreement is supposed to have a tongue-in-cheek, feisty humor about it.

This change of tone is not restricted to the two lead characters, either. Although Levant is a humorous sidekick even in the released version of the film, the pre–July 20 drafts give him more scope for laughs, including more emphasis on the ridiculousness of his conveyer belt of different lovers (a different one in each of his scenes). For example, at the opening night party, the continuity script has an extra piece of business in which Levant introduces Cleo, his girlfriend for the night:

> EZRA: This is Cleo Fernby.
> MRS. BELNEY: Haven't we met before?
> EZRA: Not unless you've been to the Club Sirocco. She does a sort of cultural act in a blue light with a couple of balloons.
> MRS. BELNEY (WITH HAPPY RECOGNITION): Of course! Sandy took me last week. I didn't recognize you, my dear.
> CLEO (IN A THIN, NASAL VOICE): Nobody ever knows me without my balloons.

This is pure Comden and Green, typical of the one-liners that pervade their scripts for *On the Town*, *Singin' in the Rain*, and many others. Of note, Astaire makes a point, in his very brief remarks on this film, of commenting on how vividly Comden and Green read their screenplay at the first read-through for Astaire and Garland: "When they read their original script to us in Arthur's office, we flipped with delighted and said we'd have a hard time following them in the parts. They are noted for their brilliant readings of their own material."[38] This underlines how closely the material was connected to the personae of Comden and Green, who at that point were known as performers as well as writers, as Astaire points out. But in the more sober version of the screenplay, as edited for Rogers, many of these kinds of comments are toned down or deleted. In another example from the same part of the draft version of the scene, Levant also makes reference to how derivative his music is—part of his onscreen star text as someone who employs self-deprecating humor—responding to Mrs. Belney's sycophantic praise with: "Yeah, and all the composers I stole it from were probably there tonight, except Tschaikovsky. He couldn't make it."

Perhaps the most obvious broad difference between the pre- and post-Rogers scripts is the secondary character of the playwright who has authored the play that Dinah leaves Josh to go and appear in. In the Garland versions, he is an English writer called Trevor Huntington, and according to John Fricke was written with Peter Lawford (the costar of *Easter Parade*) in mind.[39] Comden and Green's draft introduces him "surrounded by [a] group of girls. He is a tall, attractive, suave, very well-known playwright; famous for his verbal wit as well as his writing. He's obviously a smooth article with the ladies. . . . He speaks in a clipped, off-hand manner."[40] He also has a piece of dialogue with Levant at the party just before the Barkleys have arrived, which was later deleted before filming:

> TREVOR: Your tunes were lovely, tonight, Mr. Millar—a bit reminiscent of Kern, Rodgers and Gershwin—but lovely.
>
> EZRA: Thanks. Your plays are lovely too, Mr. Huntington—a bit reminiscent of Noel Coward, Bernard Shaw, Shakespeare and Li'l Abner—but nevertheless lovely.

Both in physique and personality, the character was changed over the summer of 1948 when Garland was replaced by Rogers. He now became a French playwright called Jacques Barredout, played by the French actor Jacques François (1920–2003). Reviews of the film described him as an "effete French dramatist" (*Variety*)[41] and "the fastidious French director who dangles the Tragic muse" (*New York Times*),[42] quite different from Comden and Green's original description of Huntington; Barredout is pretentious and has none of the fun implied in the writing of the character he replaced.

While Lawford's departure from the film may have been the reason, it is tempting to think that Huntington became Barredout in order to fulfill a common trope of the Astaire-Rogers RKO films: the exoticized, vain European played by Erik Rhodes in *The Gay Divorcee* and *Top Hat*. François as Barredout has none of Rhodes's exuberance, and of course Huntington himself was European, but not a figure of fun in the way that Barredout becomes, especially when Astaire/Josh starts impersonating him. Certainly it seems like a gesture that Huntington was so significantly rewritten: he is no longer smart or witty in the way he appears in the above excerpt from the deleted exchange with Levant, for example. More important, because Huntington is dull and no longer particularly attractive in his reincarnation as Barredout, he is scarcely a threat to Dinah's marriage to Josh. Bryan Mead suggests that "divorce in *The Barkleys of Broadway* functions as a generic convention and acts much more as a catalyst for reconciliation than as an actual, fully-realized danger. The film introduces divorce to spark the exchange of flirtation, misunderstandings, and petty jealousies that musical comedies featuring non-married protagonists are known for. . . . Josh and Dinah's marriage is never really in danger."[43] Yet this weakening of the threat to the marriage was only engineered into the screenplay in the days after Rogers took over from Garland: Fred and Ginger's marriage was too inevitable, too important to seriously question. Instead, the film provides entertainment through asking *how*, not whether, they are going to get back together.

## CONCLUSION

*The Barkleys of Broadway* provides plenty of moments of sheer entertainment that should not be dismissed when situating it within the canon of MGM musicals: for example, "A

Weekend in the Country" is a fine example of the kind of travel number exemplified by "The Trolley Song" from *Meet Me in St Louis* (1944), charmingly taking Astaire, Rogers, and Levant from the train station to Mrs. Belney's house. If the film will always seem like a disappointing reunion of the stars of *Top Hat*, it is hard to see how *any* film of theirs could ever recreate such hard to describe magic. But while *Barkleys* is clearly not from the top drawer of movie musicals, the genesis of the film helps us to understand how the creators—and particularly Gershwin, Warren, Comden, and Green—were dealing with a seemingly impossible stack of pressures, requirements, and priorities when writing and rewriting the material, and reveals just how good a job they really did.

Figure 16.6 illustrates the scale of the challenge by highlighting nine areas that the film needed to support: aspects of a film that an Astaire vehicle required; aspects that Rogers brought with her when she joined the film; aspects of Garland's performance persona that had to be showcased and then written out; the Fred and Ginger model; general aspects of an MGM musical, such as spectacle; the plot expectations of a screwball comedy (Cavell's

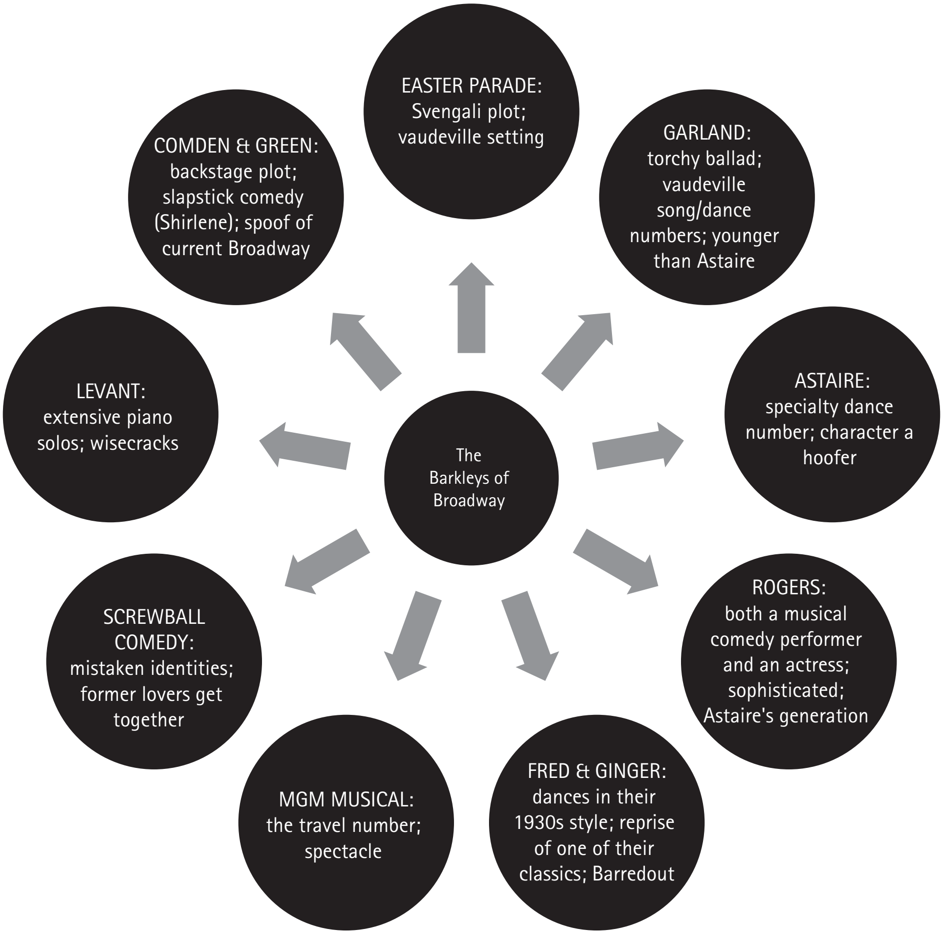
EASTER PARADE: Svengali plot; vaudeville setting
GARLAND: torchy ballad; vaudeville song/dance numbers; younger than Astaire
ASTAIRE: specialty dance number; character a hoofer
ROGERS: both a musical comedy performer and an actress; sophisticated; Astaire's generation
FRED & GINGER: dances in their 1930s style; reprise of one of their classics; Barredout
MGM MUSICAL: the travel number; spectacle
SCREWBALL COMEDY: mistaken identities; former lovers get together
LEVANT: extensive piano solos; wisecracks
COMDEN & GREEN: backstage plot; slapstick comedy (Shirlene); spoof of current Broadway
The Barkleys of Broadway

**FIGURE 16.6** Illustration of conflicting priorities in the creation of *The Barkleys of Broadway*.

"remarriage plot"); Levant's desire to play the piano; Comden and Green's style as writers; and the demand to make *The Barkleys of Broadway* a sort-of sequel to *Easter Parade*. No wonder the film doesn't entirely sparkle: it was a compromise between many different demands and conventions. Yet this chapter has shown how this was not really the fault of anybody involved: writers, production team, and stars were all working hard. The film's flaw was that recasting the movie with such a different star had a major impact on the chemistry of its elements. The artistic remarriage of Astaire and Rogers needed a tailor-made vehicle if it was to live up to the pressure of its historic moment.

## NOTES

1. Typed note to Arthur Freed from Miss Marion C. Stanton, 153 Bill Avenue, Groton, Conn. Freed papers, USC. My thanks to Andrew Buchman and Joshua Goodman for their help in transcribing the USC materials.
2. Handwritten two-page letter to Arthur Freed from Winston O'B. Walton at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, January 30, 1950. Freed papers, USC.
3. Typed letter to Freed from Sidney Phillips, April 27, 1949. Freed papers, USC.
4. For example, the *Los Angeles Times*' review was headed " 'The Barkleys of Broadway' Smart Reuniting of Astaire and Rogers," June 8, 1949, 9.
5. Hugh Fordin, *MGM's Greatest Musicals: The Arthur Freed Unit* (New York: Da Capo, 1975), 252.
6. A memo in Freed's papers at USC dated April 12, 1948, notes that Comden and Green "commenced rendering services in connection with a GARLAND-ASTAIRE original on Jan 21, 1948. 16 weeks' guarantee will end May 11, 1948 and we may terminate any time thereafter. However, we may not require them to continue services after June 22, 1948, without their consent."
7. Vincente Minnelli, *I Remember It Well* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1974), 197.
8. The cost was reported to Arthur Freed; see memo from R. Monta dated 05-20-48, Freed Papers, USC, Box 4, Folder 1.
9. The studio sent a letter to register the new title on June 7, 1948; see letter from Wheelwright, Freed Papers, Box 4, Folder 1. The censor's report still used the old title on June 10 because, of course, the screenplay had been submitted a while earlier.
10. Philip Furia, *The Songs of Hollywood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 150.
11. Ginger Rogers, *Ginger: My Story* (London: Headline, 1991), 130.
12. Rogers, *Ginger*, 255.
13. Mueller, *Astaire Dancing* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 287–288.
14. Michael Feinstein, *The Gershwins and Me* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 302–303.
15. The budget is in the Freed Papers at USC.
16. Edward Jablonski, "What about Ira?" in *The Gershwin Style*, ed. Wayne Schneider (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 268–269.
17. Ken Ryan, "Movie Talk," *Musical Express*, November 5, 1948, 2.
18. In *Lyrics on Several Occasions*, Gershwin identifies "A Set of Sagas" from across his output. See Ira Gershwin, *Lyrics on Several Occasions* (London: Elm Tree, 1977), 191ff.
19. My sincere thanks to Mr. Feinstein for recording the song and sending it to me. He recalled seeing the song at Warren's house in 1981 and was able to remember most of the refrain, noting that there was no setting of the verse in the source that he saw.

20. Scott Schechter, *Judy Garland: The Day-by-Day Chronicle of a Legend* (Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade, 2006), 152–153. The schedule can also be read on Scott Brogan's blog http://www.thejudyroom.com/filmography/judy-garland-unfinished-films/, accessed July 16, 2020. The original sources are in the Arthur Freed collection at USC.
21. Quoted in Fordin, *MGM's Greatest Musicals*, 246.
22. Rogers, *Ginger*, 254.
23. Astaire, *Steps in Time*, 294.
24. Brent Phillips, *Charles Walters: The Director Who Made Hollywood Dance* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 106.
25. Telegram to Freed from Rogers, August 8, 1948, Freed Papers, USC.
26. Memo of July 27, 1948, from Geo. Schneider to Roger Edens, Freed Papers, USC.
27. The studio was originally quoted $10,000; see telegram of August 3, 1948, from R. Monta to Arthur Freed and Roger Edens, Freed Papers, USC, Box 4, Folder 14. In the end, they had to pay $7,500 for the recording rights and $5,000 for the performance rights. See correspondence in the Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress, Box 122, Folder 7. Many thanks to Andy Buchman for sharing these sources with me.
28. Tony Thomas, *The Hollywood Musical* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1975), 250.
29. Arlene Croce, *The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book* (London: W. H. Allen, 1972), 176.
30. Martha P. Nochimson, *Screen Couple Chemistry: The Power of 2* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 179.
31. Todd Decker, *Music Makes Me* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 209–212.
32. An example of Gershwin's awkward rhyming: "It's bill and coo-y, / Tea for two-y; / Just watch your partner's / Eyes grow dewy." See *The Complete Lyrics of Ira Gershwin*, 358, for the complete lyric. Decker explains how Astaire insisted on the number's inclusion as a method of advertising his Fred Astaire Dance Studios's manual, the *Fred Astaire Dance Book* (1962). See Decker, *Music Makes Me*, 209.
33. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1.
34. Cavell, *Pursuits*, 31.
35. Cavell, *Pursuits*, 32.
36. Cavell, *Pursuits*, 17.
37. This quotation and the longer one that follows is found in various scripts in the Arthur Freed Papers, USC. This dialogue can also be read in the Shooting Script found in Alexander Street's online resource *Film Scripts Online* (accessed through ProQuest, 10 August 10, 2020).
38. Astaire, *Steps in Time*, 294.
39. John Fricke, *Judy: A Legendary Film Career* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2010). Fricke does not give a source for this (very logical) fact.
40. Scene 15 of the Shooting Script from *Film Scripts Online*.
41. Brog., "*The Barkleys of Broadway*" review, *Variety*, April 13, 1949, 11.
42. Bosley Crowther, "Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire Teamed Again in 'Barkleys of Broadway,'" *New York Times*, May 5, 1949, 34.
43. Bryan Mead, "Fred and Ginger Have to Break Up: Marriage and the Threat of Divorce in *The Barkleys of Broadway*," *Storytelling* 15 (2015): 42.

## CHAPTER 17

# "THE SAME STORY TOLD OVER AND OVER"

## *The Mythology of Stardom in the Musical* A Star Is Born *Films*

JULIE LOBALZO WRIGHT

## INTRODUCTION

One of the defining myths of film stardom is that stars are born. This can be traced to the way Hollywood created, sustained, and perpetuated myths through the promotion of stars, on- and offscreen, in the classical era. The studios engaged in a delicate balance between myth and reality or, more precisely, the organic nature of innate talent and the manufacture of stars. There are numerous examples of how Hollywood transformed ordinary individuals into screen gods and goddesses admired by fans throughout the world. Lucille LeSueur became Joan Crawford after a studio contest to rename the actress. Crawford also lost weight early in her career, assisting in emphasizing her cheekbones, part of the physical allure of female stars of the classical era. Equally, the film star, emerging in the early part of the twentieth century, is shrouded in mythology through the story of "The Biograph Girl," then only known to the public through her association with the Biograph Company, who was incorrectly reported killed in a car accident. Soon after, an article by producer Carl Laemmle denounced the death announcement, named the actress (Florence Lawrence), and proclaimed her to be alive and soon to be appearing in the Independent Motion Picture Company's new film, *The Broken Oath* (Harry Solter, 1910).[1] Although this anecdote has been disproven by various scholars through historical evidence that producers were advertising actors before the Lawrence stunt, it illustrates how interconnected mythology and film stardom are and that this tradition extends from Hollywood through to the scholarly study of stars.

The rise and fall of stars has been immortalized in a wide range of films, including "stardom films" that, according to Karen McNally, "reinforce star mythology" through fairy tales[2] and backstudio pictures that, as Steven Cohan argues, depict Hollywood and its stars industrially and symbolically.[3] Biopics, also, as Deborah Cartmell puts it, "draw their stories from 'real life' and, on the whole, rely on an enduring formula based on a real person who stands out in a crowd."[4] Cartmell states that biopics focus on extraordinary people but, also, individuals that may be viewed as stars. The biopic, as a genre, has embraced stardom narratives, as has the musical, with the two genres overlapping on many occasions. Films about performers are frequently positioned at the crossroads of both genres due to the necessity to demonstrate why this particular person "stood out in a crowd." Hollywood, especially in the classical period, produced numerous films about the "star-making process," including the four versions of *A Star Is Born* (1937, William A. Wellman; 1954, George Cukor; 1976, Frank Pierson; and 2018, Bradley Cooper) regarded by Camille Paglia as "Hollywood's canonical myth-saga" that captures "both the glory and cruelty of the modern entertainment industry."[5] Specifically, these films are concerned with the ambiguity behind the title and what it means "to say a star is 'born'?"[6] Notably, the last three versions of this saga have been musical films, indicating the genre's capacity to expose the star-making process and other stardom myths.

This chapter will examine the relationship between the musical film genre and stardom, especially the manufacture of stardom and the popular myth that stars are born, illustrated in the *A Star Is Born* films from 1954, 1976, and 2018. The musical, as this chapter argues, is the ideal genre to demonstrate the manufacture of stardom owing to the genre's illustration of talent, its self-reflexive nature, and the dual focus of musicals. The films referenced in this chapter bond stardom with the musical, demasking the mechanics behind stardom and the musical while, nonetheless, remythologizing stars and genre. Some scholars, most notably Rick Altman and Jerome Delamater,[7] have hesitated to refer to the 1954 film as a musical, and there are similar anxieties about defining the 2018 film as a musical. As I will argue in this chapter, however, the ties to the genre are, at times, explicit, especially the centrality of musical performances to these films. Before investigating these connections, it is important to first lay out the history of the *A Star Is Born* films, indicating their source material and its links to stars and genre.

## *A Star Is Born*: Origins

1932's *What Price Hollywood* (George Cukor) is generally perceived as the origin for the *A Star Is Born* remakes. Richard Dyer asserts in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* that *What Price Hollywood* is itself a reworking of a novel turned silent film entitled *The Skyrocket* (Marshall Neilan, 1926), a film that has been lost but followed the same "rise and fall motif, the ingénue, the enabling man of power, the conflict (for the woman) between career and marriage."[8] Remarkably, *The Skyrocket* starred Penny Hopkins Joyce, a *Ziegfeld Follies* girl who became famous for her many marriages and extravagant lifestyle as a media figure,[9] linking show business/the musical and celebrity/stardom in Hollywood's founding star is born narrative. *What Price Hollywood* was also influenced by a real-life figure[10]—Clara Bow—and as J. E. Smyth outlines, Bow's meteoric rise in the 1920s, global fame as "The 'It' Girl,"[11] rapid fall, and eventual retirement in 1931 guided producer David O. Selznick's vision of a film that celebrated the first wave of Hollywood giants from the early silent period.[12] *What Price Hollywood* eventually starred Constance Bennett as aspiring actress Mary Evans, who serves film director Max Carey at the Brown Derby. The two strike up a friendship that leads to Mary's stardom, a difficult marriage for Mary to a polo player, and Max's career decline and subsequent suicide. This film and others that came before, such as *Souls for Sale* (Rupert Hughes, 1923) and *Hollywood* (James Cruze, 1923), exposed the "consequences of Hollywood's manufactured myths,"[13] but *What Price Hollywood*, through Selznick's directives, was also meant to eulogize a period of Hollywood that had become outdated by the early 1930s. In fact, as suggested by Smyth, *What Price Hollywood* and its remake, *A Star Is Born* (1937), established a style for historical films about Hollywood that were both celebratory and tragic,[14] revealing its realities, while restoring its myths.

*A Star Is Born* (1937)[15] begins with starstruck farm girl Esther Blodgett (Janet Gaynor) and the established cliché of the small-town girl who has dreams of making it big in Hollywood.[16] As noted, this version is not a musical and it can be argued that the film is dubious about Esther's talent. While there are comments in the film about her "natural talent" (this is said on a radio broadcast), there are few scenes that illustrate the X factor that can lead to stardom. Esther is discovered at a Hollywood party where during her serving of guests, she proceeds to impersonate contemporary film stars, such as Mae West and Greta Garbo, before alcoholic film star Norman Maine notices her and arranges for a screen test. Blodgett receives elocution lessons, meetings with the hair and makeup department, and a name change (Vicki Lester) before she lands her big break in a starring role. Determination, talent (at least, a natural affinity for performing in front of a camera), and luck underpin Lester's success. However, the film presents her achievements, such as her Academy Award for Best Actress, without confirmation of her talent through performance scenes and/or praise from audiences (besides the throngs of fans waiting for her at Norman's funeral and the premiere of her first film after his suicide). The musical is able to facilitate moments that indicate these missing pieces of the stardom puzzle by substantiating talent and star quality through an interplay between stars and audiences.

## Talent, Star Quality, and Audiences

While the musical genre has been in existence since the advent of sound cinema and endures to this day, the Hollywood studio system is recurrently regarded as the pinnacle of the genre, producing many (if not most) of the genre's canonical films. Musicals were frequently star vehicles, with all the major studios retaining their own repertory of musical stars.[17] Steven Cohan notes how MGM musicals, in particular, took great care to plan "numbers so that they serve narrative progression, but they also regularly feature star solos, specialty acts and dream ballets."[18] Whether these numbers are integrated[19] or not is not the concern of this chapter; however, it cannot be questioned that musical numbers habitually promoted stars and their song-and-dance abilities to a spectacular level. Furthermore, filmmaking practices, including the direct address that often takes place during a musical number, makes "stars the main attraction."[20] The musical was above all else, according to Cohan, a "star-driven genre."[21]

How certain individuals become stars, even musical stars, is, like Esther Blodgett in *A Star Is Born* (1937), a mix of determination, talent, and luck. Good fortune figures more prominently in the recent *Star Is Born* films, with John Norman Howard (1976) and Jackson Maine (2018) randomly encountering the small clubs where Esther (1976) and Ally (2018) are performing. The 1954 film is less auspicious with luck owing to Esther's paid performance at the "Night of Stars" where Norman is set to appear; however, she later discloses her yearning for "the kind of luck every girl singer of a band dreams of," telling Norman that she hopes to be discovered by a talent scout, which would lead to a hit single. It is, possibly, to her detriment that Norman informs her that the dream isn't big enough, steering Esther toward a future as a star and, additionally, the widow of a has-been alcoholic actor. As McNally argues, this frames her stardom through Norman's ambitions for her.[22] Furthermore, this exchange is central to Esther's and the audience's appreciation of her talent because what Norman is expressing is that Esther possesses everything that makes an individual a star: talent and luck, with some star quality thrown in.

Star quality is notoriously difficult to define, with Martin Shingler suggesting the qualities of "glamour, physical attractiveness (of face and body), vocal attractiveness and distinctiveness" are "widely considered necessary for the attainment of star status."[23] Hollywood in the classical period was systematic in its approach to its product, but there was no stardom formula. There was, however, as remarked by Jeanine Basinger, a "sensible list of informed observations" that Hollywood followed.[24] This list is very long, but the second feature itemized by Basinger is talent. Curiously, there is little written about talent in star studies. Richard Dyer's seminal work *Stars* includes a short section on magic and talent where he proposes that how much one believes in special qualities, giftedness, or talent hinges on "how much you believe in 'great unique individuals' as opposed to famous people being 'the right type in the right place at the right time.' "[25] Although talent can be debated, musicals frequently suggest it is an essential ingredient, especially musicals that relate to the entertainment business. Similar to biopics about performers, musicals that focus on individuals in show business advance a "cultural value of talent"[26] through musical performances that stop the show, literally and metaphorically.

Talent and hard work are commonly bonded in musicals, especially those that expose the inner workings of the entertainment industry and/or putting on a show. Many early Hollywood musicals were deemed backstage musicals, focusing on the planning and execution of theatrical performances. These films, including *42nd Street* (Lloyd Bacon and Busby Berkeley, 1933) and *Dames* (Ray Enright and Busby Berkeley, 1934), relied on scenes that included casting calls and rehearsals, demonstrating the fortitude it takes to be a professional performer. Several of these films feature a chorus girl gaining the opportunity to replace the star attraction, thereby granting the girl "overnight" fame. Musicals are at pains to illustrate that overnight success is mythical, while at the same time promoting this myth in various ways, none more so than the title of the similarly plotted *A Star Is Born* films (demythologizing and remythologizing stardom). Still, dedication is a central tenet of musicals with post-classical musicals like *A Chorus Line* (Richard Attenborough, 1985) and, especially, *Fame* (Alan Parker, 1980) foregrounding the auditions and the study of performance, respectively, with truncated final performances in comparison to the 1930s backstage musicals. *Fame* (NBC, Syndication, 1982–1987) was even adapted into a successful television series that featured a famous monologue by Debbie Allen (who portrayed dance instructor Lydia Grant) in the series title credits: "You got big dreams? You want fame? Well, fame costs. And here is where you start payin' . . . in sweat." Hard work is a central tenet toward the achievement of the American Dream. The American context of the Hollywood industry should not be decoupled from the musical's desire to present hard work hand in hand with success, even if that success is perceived to be "overnight."

Included in the *Hollywood Reporter* article by Paglia is a table comparing all four *A Star Is Born* films with a column devoted to "how they differ." It is observed that Janet Gaynor's Esther Blodgett is the only ingénue that "doesn't sing, or work, before being discovered."[27] This corresponds to the limitations of the 1937 version owing to its dramatic and not musical context. Dyer notes that there is a "sense of their sheer love of performing" in the musical remakes because Esther (Ally in the 2018 film) is a longtime professional who finally receives her due.[28] This is not to suggest that audiences watch Esther in the 1937 film and question her star quality. Esther is, to return to Shingler, in possession of the star qualities that are necessary for stardom with some of her charisma surfacing through Janet Gaynor who was a significant star at the time of release. The film confirms the character's fame in various ways, especially through the "success myth." Dyer outlines this myth in *Stars:*

> Particularly as developed in the star system, the success myth tries to orchestrate several contradictory elements: that ordinariness is the hallmark of a star; that the system rewards talent and "specialness"; that luck, "breaks," which may happen to anyone typify the career of the star; and that hard work and professionalism are necessary for stardom. Some stars reconcile all four elements, while with others only some aspects are emphasised. Stardom as a whole holds all four things true.[29]

The humble beginnings of Esther/Ally point to her ordinariness, while I have outlined the importance of hard work and the general acceptance that luck plays a part in all of the *A Star is Born* films.

Talent and "specialness" are challenging to exhibit; however, the musical films have an advantage over the 1937 film because the musical is proficient in authenticating what makes a star extraordinary. As Basinger declares, “whatever the x factor might be, it had to show up on the screen and it had to be seen by more than one person.”[30] Richard Dyer utilizes the famous “The Man That Got Away” performance by Judy Garland in the 1954 *A Star Is Born* as an example of authenticity authenticated onscreen, with this authentication effect bestowing charisma on the star, guaranteeing his or her star quality.[31] Crucial to this process is the audience, both diegetic and non-diegetic, witnessing, endorsing, and appreciating the star’s charisma through musical performance. The most recent *Star Is Born* offers authenticity through the “realness” of Lady Gaga’s live singing, especially in the scene when Jackson watches Ally’s performance of “La Vie en Rose” at a Drag Bar.[32] The musical is a genre that, according to John D. Shout, telegraphs “the success of an entertainer by showing the approval of an audience, inviting us to react along with them.”[33] Therefore, James Mason (Norman Maine) bookends the “The Man That Got Away” performance, watching from the side[34] as Esther rehearses the song with the band, commenting afterward that Esther has that “little something extra” (i.e., star quality). Another musical from the post-classical period, *Victor/Victoria* (Blake Edwards, 1982), broadens the idea of star quality by insinuating that while Victoria Grant (Julie Andrews) is a gifted singer, confirmed through Toddy’s (Robert Preston) impressed response to her audition, it is only after she becomes a female impersonator that her talent is matched by the allure that makes Victoria/Victor the toast of Paris.

Jane Feuer reasons that performances in musicals displace the “privileged relationship between musical entertainment and its audience” by giving the audience a “sense of participation”[35] in the conferring of talent. These moments, like “The Man That Got Away” performance, are vital to convince the non-diegetic audience that the “woman is the real deal.”[36] It must be acknowledged that all three musical remakes star musical/music titans who were at their peak and/or had established their stardom over many years prior to *A Star Is Born*: Judy Garland, Barbra Streisand, and Lady Gaga. The non-diegetic audience has, to a degree, gone to the cinema to see Garland, Streisand, and Gaga perform;[37] however, there is still an imperative to formalize their characters’ stardom within the confines of this particular stardom narrative.

While the 1954 film condenses the authentication of talent into one scene, the subsequent remakes elongate this process over multiple scenes between the established male star and the female ingénue. It is worth stating that while *A Star Is Born* (1954) is a musical, only the woman is a singer; therefore, the musical unification takes place after the couple marry when Esther sings “It’s a New World” in their honeymoon suite. In the 1976 film, John Norman Howard (Kris Kristofferson) interrupts Esther’s (Streisand) show at a late-night club, admiring her singing while distracted by some of his fans. The two eventually go to her apartment, John Norman invites Esther to one of his shows, and finally they end up at his mansion where they consummate the relationship. Before they make love, John Norman finds Esther playing a song on his piano (“Lost Inside of You”) that she is has written but has yet to finish because she is unable to match lyrics with the high-pitched melody. John Norman begins to sing lyrics with the scene acting as a merging of the two artists (his words and her music), just before the two come together as a romantic couple.[38] This is a significant moment for the couple, but the song, “Lost Inside of You,” is not heard again in the film.

This pattern is replicated in the 2018 *A Star Is Born* except, crucially, the couple’s first co-written song[39]—“Shallow”—is teased during their first meeting and then performed in its entirety when Jackson Maine (Bradley Cooper) invites Ally (Lady Gaga) to sing the song onstage with him. As Ally and Jackson get to know one another in the parking lot of a convenience store, Ally begins a spontaneous a cappella song about Jackson before ultimately singing one of her compositions that she expects to be a chorus to a song. After Ally finishes singing, Jackson comments, “Can I tell you a secret? I think you might be a songwriter.” This statement asserts that Ally’s stardom is predicated on her singing and songwriting talent, hinted at in the 1976 film, but not as overtly expressed.[40] Whereas this scene is fundamental in expressing the potential of Ally and the partnership with Jackson as songwriters, the full performance of “Shallow” functions in a similar manner to “The Man That Got Away” (1954) and “The Woman in the Moon” (1976), conferring talent on Ally through the participation of the audience.

Just after Jackson greets Ally backstage, he returns to the stage to play “Shallow,” the pieced-together song from the parking lot scene, now arranged by Jackson. While Ally is in close-up throughout the performance the scene features many cutaways to Jackson substantiating Ally’s giftedness by singing along to the song and pushing her to the microphone at the center of the stage. Ally is frequently struck by the enormity of the moment, putting her hands over her eyes and face, indicating the gravity of the performance as her, potentially, lucky break.[41] When Jackson strums the final chord, his face projects smug satisfaction knowing that the song and Ally have been rapturously adored by the concert audience (see Figure 17.1). This one shot relegates Jackson to the background while Ally in the foreground turns to view the audience with a shocked expression. Here is where the concert audience participates in authenticating her stardom through the overwhelming applause and cheers that greet the end of the song, underlined by Ally’s comments that there are “so many people” and Jackson mumbling “pretty fucking good.” There is a similar look of surprise from Esther in 1976’s *A Star Is Born* with cutaways to

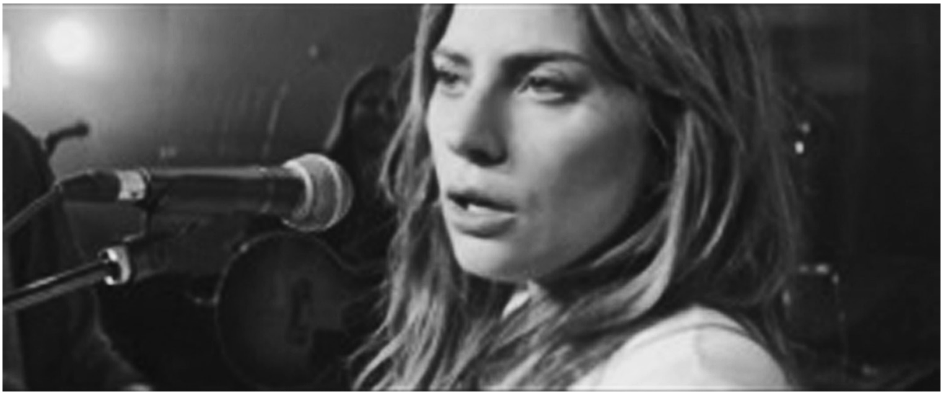

FIGURE 17.1 Lady Gaga in the 2018 *A Star is Born*.

John Norman on the side of the stage watching her performance with delight. The 2018 film, however, merges romance and musicianship onstage and in front of a crowd who, in turn, validate the talent and partnership.

## STARDOM AND THE SELF-REFLEXIVE MUSICAL

As Jane Feuer remarks, musicals frequently allow audiences to participate in the admiration of musical talent with the scenes analyzed above as examples where the shifting perspectives engage in a process of manipulation. The films are overt in their desire to make the audience believe we are witnessing a star being born. In the article "The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," Feuer argues that self-reflexive musicals use theatrical audiences in films as a "point of identification for audiences *of* the film," sometimes in very subtle ways.[42] It is notable that the 1954 film, as pointed out by Jerome Delamater, does not feature a triumphant performance from Judy Garland, after the stirring standing ovation for the recently deceased Norman Maine at a charity event.[43] The 1976 and 2018 films end on the image of the widowed star belting out her late husband's final composition ("With One More Look at You" and "I'll Never Love Again," respectively) to a silent, but enraptured audience.[44] While the 1976 film concludes with a freezeframe of Streisand lost in the emotion of the performance (see Figure 17.2), the 2018 film ends with Lady Gaga looking directly into the camera in a tight close-up as tears stream down her face. I have purposely referred to the actress/

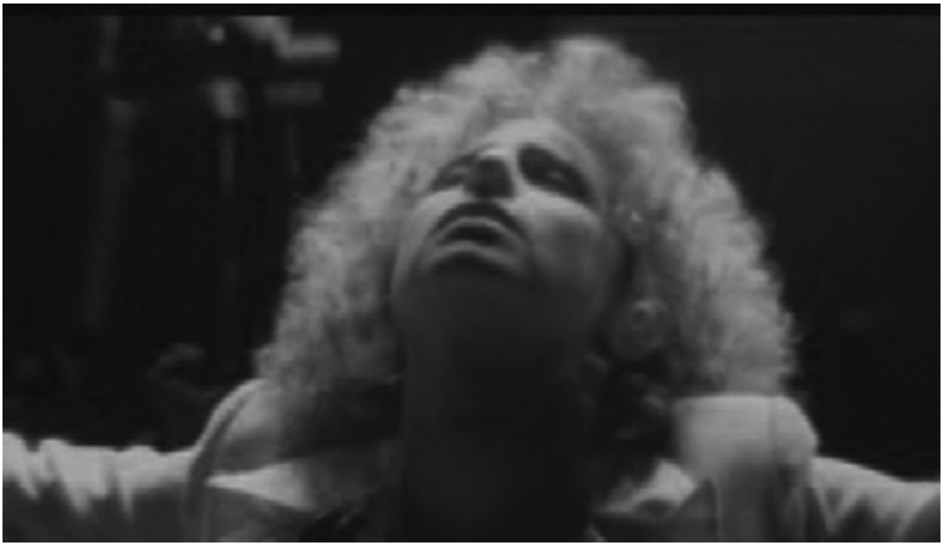

**FIGURE 17.2** Barbra Streisand in the 1976 *A Star is Born*.

singers' names because the final performances, and, especially, the final shots act as an acknowledgment that the film (non-diegetic) audience have had the privilege to witness the star performances of Streisand and Gaga. Delamater even comments that the freezeframe on Streisand, after a compelling five-minute performance where the singer is filmed in close-up with no cuts, implies that the audience of the film is "invited to applaud *Streisand* at the end" as opposed to the character of Esther Hoffman Howard.[45] It can be argued that the *Star Is Born* films have built toward these star performances, taking place at the pinnacle of their narrative stardom as opposed to the beginning of their career.

Musical films about a similar star trajectory from chance meeting through to exposure, stardom, and (the husband's) career decline also utilize the film text to impress the film audience with a star performance. 1977's *New York*, *New York* (Martin Scorsese) "reprises the plot of *A Star is Born*"[46] with Judy Garland's daughter, Liza Minnelli, portraying the young woman who finds stardom almost in spite of her boozy and violent husband's (Robert De Niro) attempts to derail both their careers. Years after Francine (Minnelli) and Jimmy (De Niro)'s divorce, the film shows Francine in a recording studio with their son sleeping as she records "But the World Goes 'Round," the song that will eventually make her a worldwide star. The performance begins with a wide-shot of the recording studio dimly lit and Francine positioned in the foreground in a recording booth. Slowly, the lights in the background are turned off and a spotlight on Francine becomes more prevalent. The camera begins to zoom in before the spotlight narrows, revealing only Francine's face. As the song and Minnelli's singing builds, the spotlight widens to show her from the waist up, finishing the song with a flourish of arm gestures, belting notes, and, crucially, without the microphone recording Francine. There is, technically, an audience watching the performance from the sound booth; however, there is no theatrical audience for the film audience to identify with. Indeed, the professional audience would be focused on the technical performance, while the film audience would be expected to revel in Francine's flair and talent. The film substitutes the theatrical audience through an expressive *mise-en-scène* that invites the film audience to applaud Minnelli, in a similar fashion to Streisand and Gaga in the *A Star Is Born* films. The "But the World Goes 'Round" performance is comparable to "With One More Look at You/ Watch Closely Now"[47] and "I'll Never Love Again" as a self-reflexive moment, exposing the manufacture of the filmed musical performance. This is anticipated in the Scorsese film, itself a deconstruction of the classical Hollywood genre film,[48] but musicals are frequently at pains to reveal their inner workings.

Another celebrated example takes place in the star-focused MGM musical *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donan and Gene Kelly, 1952), when Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) serenades Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds) on a soundstage on the Monumental Pictures backlot. The scene begins with Don and Kathy on an empty soundstage before Don turns on various lights and smoke machines, and places Kathy on the top of a ladder. This "proper setting" for his declaration of love, revealed through the performance of "You Were Meant for Me," demystifies the moviemaking process and the "sleight of hand necessitated by Hollywood's cinematic tricks and business practices"[49] through Don's detailing of how a backdrop represents a sunset, a machine recreates smoke from a distant mountain, and colored lights illuminate a garden. As the performance continues, however, and in a similar manner to "But the World Goes 'Round," the illusion of movie magic is restored[50] through the diminishing of technology on the soundstage and the sustained focus on the dancing of Kelly and Reynolds—a genuine star performance, prevalent in MGM musicals.[51] Although the self-reflexive musical moment in *Singin' in the Rain* acts as a coming together of the couple (similar to "Lost Inside of You" and "Shallow") and a celebration of the dancing and singing ability of the stars (Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds), "You Were Meant for Me" restores distance, ending with a tracking shot away from the couple. This is in stark contrast to "But the World Goes 'Round," "With One More Look at You/Watch Closely Now," and "I'll Never Love Again," which feature similar referential moments, but concludes with a close-up of the star performer (Minnelli, Streisand, Lady Gaga).

## The Dualities of Stardom and Musicals

Richard Maltby begins a section on *A Star Is Born* (1937) in his *Hollywood Cinema* book by declaring, "One of Hollywood's most telling characteristics, is that, while appearing to draw attention to the mechanisms of its industrial process, it masks one level of operations by selectively highlighting another."[52] "But the World Goes 'Round" and "You Were Meant for Me" are musical performances that operate in a similar fashion, revealing and disguising the musical genre's codes and conventions. Stardom narratives are comparable, analogous to biopics that, according to Cartwell and Polasek, present a "double effect" through the mythologizing and deconstructing of a famous individual's life.[53] These are not competing, but complementary strands, operating in tandem to reveal stardom myths and realities.

There is a duality to both stardom and the musical through the necessity for a star to display ordinary *and* extraordinary traits[54] and the musical's dual-focus narrative.[55] Altman's theory that musicals feature a dual focus, privileging the couple through the amplification of parallel components, such as musical numbers and personal values, is the ideal narrative structure to conceal and reveal the mechanisms of Hollywood stardom. The *A Star Is Born* films fulfill the dream-factory mythology of Hollywood, demystifying entertainment by revealing what "goes on behind the scenes," while also remythologizing what has been exposed.[56] Although made in various decades, the films confirm that stars are born *and* made. As discussed earlier, talent and luck are part of the equation; and while there is no stardom formula, there is a stardom process. In the 1937 and 1954 films, the Hollywood studio lot is the locus for alterations to names, appearances, and performances, with a delicate balance exhibited between nurturing innate talent and manufacturing a star. The 1976 film includes comments about Esther's appearance and performance style; however, she asserts her own opinion on many occasions and is, generally, unchanged from the beginning to the end of the film. The character, infamously, wears clothing from Streisand's own closet, indicated in the end credits, merging the character with the star.[57] The 2018 film focuses on the unusual looks of the lead star, including numerous comments about her nose and a transformation from mousy brown hair to an electric orange color. Furthermore, Jackson first meets Ally and is taken by her performance while she is exceedingly made up with thin eyebrows, fake eyelashes, and painted black hair. This aligns the character with the singer-actress, known for her outrageous costumes and makeup—Gaga is herself a transformed persona from aspiring actress/singer Stefani Germanotta.

These reflexive contexts assist in perpetuating this duality of stardom—stars are born/stars are made—as does the musical context. For every "The Man That Got Away" performance that relies on spontaneity and privacy, thereby authenticating stardom, there is a "Born in a Trunk" that depends on multiple mechanisms—editing, costume changes, background dancers, a narrative within the song, etc.—for the audience to reach the same conclusion. Both types of performances are illustrating the talent of Judy Garland, but one hides its methods, while the other uncovers its manufacture. The 1976 and 2018 films manifest this duplicity in more subtle ways, reflecting their post-classical release dates and the music industry environment. In 1976's *A Star Is Born*, Esther's gig is interrupted and upstaged by John Norman who argues with a waitress and fan, ultimately punching the fan in the face and abruptly ending Esther's performance. The next time Esther performs is almost an hour into the film when John Norman schedules her for a studio session with his backing band, Speedway. Esther tells John Norman that she imagines a different sound for her music, asking him to tell the band to produce a sound that is more "classical." The film immediately cuts to a close-up of Esther recording "Evergreen," with John Norman adding backing vocals to the chorus. This performance is choreographed through the circling of the camera around Streisand and Kristofferson and the slight breaking of the fourth wall that takes place at the end of the song when Streisand giggles and looks off camera.

The calculation of recording music and filming a single shot unite in this scene, with the following performance of "The Woman in the Moon" acting as a spontaneous remedy. John Norman interrupts his own performance with the intention that Esther will instead sing at the benefit concert. Esther timidly begins to sing in a soft, trembling voice. Slowly, her voice builds as she gains confidence, only teetering when her backup singers surprise her by joining her onstage. As mentioned earlier, "The Woman in the Moon" could be considered the performance that authenticates Esther's talent, but its placement just after "Evergreen" does suggest that while her talent may be manufactured—or more accurately, amplified through a production process—her star quality is inherent.

Numerous journalists pointed out the opposition between pop music and authenticity that underlines 2018's *A Star Is Born*.[58] While the film appears to pit Jackson's country-rock against Ally's post-discovery artificial pop, there are complexities to this simple opposition through Jack's own co-opting of his brother's (Sam Elliott) voice and admiration of his father's unseen/unheard talent.[59] The criticisms Jack levels at Ally are, generally, focused on alterations forced upon her by her new manager, indicating that it is the manufacture of her stardom he rejects. Tellingly, before "I'll Never Love Again," Bobby (Elliott) relays to Ally Jack's belief that music is essentially "twelve notes between any octave" and the "same story told over and over. Forever. All that the artist can offer the world is how they see those notes." Bobby pauses and the image cuts to Ally standing backstage at a theater before walking to the center stage with his comments, aurally, underpinning this moment: "he loved how you see them." The performance that follows is not the country-rock Jack favored in the film, but a saccharine ballad indicating his objections were towards her pop stardom, not her musical talent.

This final performance in the film is comparable to Esther's back-to-back "Evergreen"/ "The Woman in the Moon" performances, unifying technical ability with genuine talent. "I'll Never Love Again" takes place in a theater with Ally dressed in a gown, accompanied by an orchestra. This is shot in a tight close-up with the camera slowly circling Ally and a theater audience just at the edge of the shot. The focus on Ally is interrupted three times cutting to scenes between Ally and Jackson, with the last flashback aurally replacing Ally's voice for Jackson's as he plays the incomplete song on the piano. Similar to "With One More Look at You" in the 1976 film, this incomplete composition begins with the deceased spouse; however, it is the living star that finishes the song and performs it with a gusto never exhibited by the deceased husband. Crucially, the audience sees this contrast in the flashback that intrudes on Ally's performance. It could be argued that the film strips away all the manufactured grandeur of "I'll Never Love Again" to illuminate the genuine core of the song, equating Ally with the former and Jackson with the later. I argue, however, that the flashback to Jackson and Ally acts as a final send-off for Jackson who is now completely eclipsed by his wife, confirmed through her direct gaze to the audience (see Figure 17.3), authenticating, as Dyer suggested in relation to "The Man That Got Away," that the star has been born.

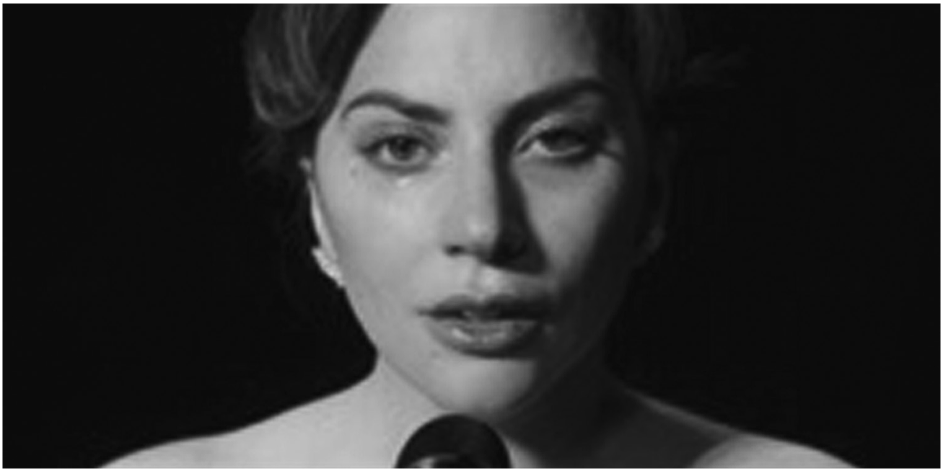

**FIGURE 17.3** Lady Gaga in the 2018 *A Star is Born*.

Jane Feuer states "the musical, technically the most complex type of film produced in Hollywood, paradoxically has always been the genre which attempts to give the greatest illusion of spontaneity and effortlessness."[60] While "I'll Never Love Again" "illustrates the elaborate processes of production and manufacture" through orchestration, costuming, and the filming method, at the core of the performance is the authenticity of Ally, the particular case of stardom exhibited in the film.[61] Markers of authenticity, according to Dyer, include lack of control, unpremeditated, and private, all indicated in this performance where Gaga exhibits embellished gestures, breathy pauses, and the camera's almost complete focus on just her with no cuts to audience members. There is an effortlessness to Ally's performances, including this one, that is only matched by Jack's short acoustic rendition of "Maybe It's Time" in the Drag Bar early in the film. Ally's stardom, unlike Jack who exhibits a tortured demeanor even onstage, is grounded in her immediate, spontaneous, and essential self,[62] illustrated through her ability to transform a rough piano-driven ballad into the sweeping epic that concludes the film. Ally is both born and made, transitioning from the woman who could sing and perform other people's songs ("La Vie en Rose") to the confident, singer-songwriter of "I'll Never Love Again."

There is also an intertextual reference that takes place at the very beginning of the film that supports this reading of the final performance. After Ally finishes her shift as a waitress at work, she walks up an underground ramp while singing a verse to "Over the Rainbow," an unequivocal reference to Judy Garland. The camera is positioned at a distance and behind the figure of Ally walking up the ramp. The title of the film is slowly revealed with "A Star" first illuminated before "Is Born" follows (see Figure 17.4). Positioned squarely between is Ally and this moment presents Ally, as the star who will be born, but also Lady Gaga, starring in her first Hollywood film. The final shot of Ally/Gaga in a close-up, looking directly at the film (non-diegetic) audience, corroborates the impression that we are watching the character *and* star positioned for stardom, as opposed to the earlier versions of the story that featured female stars at

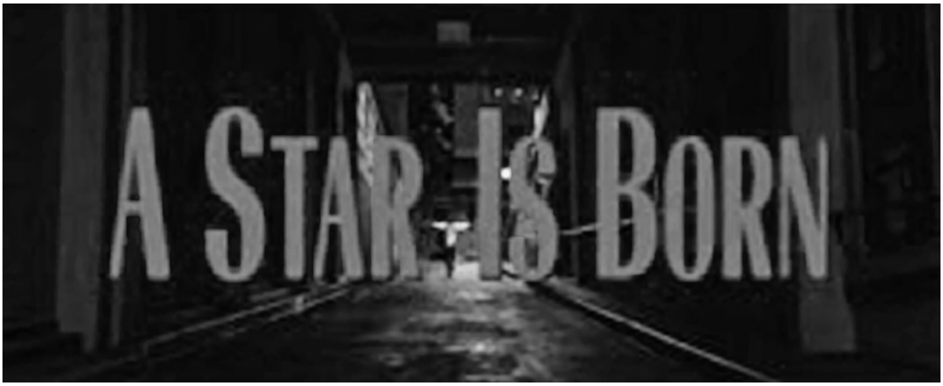

**FIGURE 17.4** The opening titles of *A Star is Born* (2018).

the pinnacle of their film stardom and/or in the process of making a comeback (as was the case for Garland).

## CONCLUSION

Richard Maltby points out that the "frequency with which *A Star is Born* has been produced . . . makes its particular mythology so central to understanding Hollywood's relationship with its audience."[63] While there are celebratory aspects of this mythology, all four films also unveil the dark side of making it in Hollywood. The 1937 film even released a poster that read "Is the Price of Stardom a Broken Heart?" positioned in between images of the two stars, Gaynor and March, in separate love hearts. The equilibrium between positive and negative outcomes of fame are held in tension, mirroring Hollywood's own complicated relationship with stardom. Altman argues that the opening credits of *A Star Is Born* (1954), which feature Los Angeles bathed in a sunset and night sky before an abrupt cut to the blown spotlights for the "Night of Stars" benefit, reveal this dichotomy: "two views, two sensations, two overtones to the phenomenon of stardom; either distant and beautiful against the summer sky, or overheated, uncomfortable, and artificial to the close observer."[64] While Hollywood continues to perpetuate the myth that some individuals are more extraordinary than others, it also goes out of its way to promote cautionary tales through biopics and star-is-born narratives.

Jeanine Basinger charts Eleanor Powell's career in *The Star Machine*, from a younger dancer in New York to her many years as one of Hollywood's greatest musical stars in the 1930s and early 1940s to her early retirement in 1945. Basinger uses Powell as an example of the "star machine process," detailing Powell's various lessons, physical makeover, publicity material, etc., that combined created the tap-dancing star of fourteen musical films. Basinger ends her section on Powell by writing:

> The truth, however, was nowhere near as interesting as the belief that she stepped into fame overnight. Not only was that concept more appealing and dramatic, but it also held out the sweet promise to all those in the audience, who, like little Eleanor Powell once had, were plunking down a buck a week for tap-dancing lessons. Hollywood never believed in the overnight sensation, or even the "star is born myth." But if it sold tickets to let an audience believe that Eleanor Powell, the Queen of Taps, was an overnight sensation, that, folks, was showbiz.[65]

Crucially, Basinger follows this statement with "what MGM did to transform Eleanor Powell was in no way unique. The product was special, not the process."[66] This returns to the need for talent, star quality, and specialness. While Hollywood has propagated, and continues to do so, stardom narratives that endorse stars as being born, underlining these stories is the assembly of stardom. Talent may not be fabricated, but stardom must be, whether that is through a chance meeting that leads to a recording session or a push onstage to perform a pieced-together original song. It is unsurprising that the musical, itself a genre dependent on an interplay between technical proficiency and spontaneity, with professionals often portraying amateurs, has been the ideal setting for this "myth-saga."

The three *A Star Is Born* musical films express the pleasure and pain of stardom through their dramatic storylines, but it is the musical performances that relay the wide gap between success and heartache. The musical moments discussed in this chapter are, frequently, grandiose, sometimes through staging, but more regularly through emotion. This is what makes musical films "pure entertainment" displaying utopianism, as argued by Dyer, "contained in the feelings it embodies."[67] Non-Western films, especially those made in India, exploit non-realist modes with the aim of elaborately expressing emotions through song and dance. Anna Morcom notes, "rather than expressing emotions realistically, in the way that might be expressed in everyday life, to use songs in (Hindi) films expresses them 'in a better way,' one that is larger-than-life and grandiose."[68] Unsurprisingly, there have been two Indian films that mirror the *A Star Is Born* narrative: *Aashiqui 2* (Mohit Suri, 2013) and *Nee Jathaga Nenundali* (Jaya Ravindra, 2014).[69]

Equally, the Hollywood musical is a genre whose momentum is measured in emotion and feelings through song and dance. The mechanisms of the genre and the manufacture of stardom substantiate the stardom myth through musical moments that illustrate the purity of talent and charisma and the construction of fame. Stars are born and made, with this mythology repeated throughout the decades in films that present this duality of stardom through the dual focus of the musical. In the *A Star Is Born* films, stardom and the musical work in tandem to reveal and restore one of Hollywood's greatest stories of success and failure.

## NOTES

1. See Paul McDonald, *The Star System: Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities* (New York and London: Wallflower, 2000), 15.
2. Karen McNally, *The Stardom Film: Creating the Hollywood Fairy Tale* (New York and London: Wallflower, 2021), 4.
3. Steven Cohan, *Hollywood by Hollywood: The Backstudio Picture and the Mystique of Making Movies* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press).
4. Deborah Cartmell, "The Hollywood Biopic of the Twentieth Century: A History," in *A Companion to the Biopic*, edited by Deborah Cartmell and Ashley D. Polasek (Hoboken, NJ, and Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 95.
5. Camille Paglia, "Sexism among the Star Is Borns," *Hollywood Reporter* 425, no. 8 (February 20, 2019): 82–84.
6. Richard Dyer, "Between Parturition and Manufacture," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 5, 2018, https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/between-parturition-and-manufacture/.

7. Rick Altman's defining book on the genre, *The American Film Musical*, features a photograph of James Mason in *A Star Is Born* with the description below, "Is this a musical?" unequivocally demonstrating Altman's ambivalence toward the film's genre classification. Meanwhile, Jerome Delamater argues in his chapter " 'Once More, from the Top': Musicals the Second Time Around" that the lack of a final performance for Vicki Lester after the death of Norman "reinforces the sense that the film may not be a musical at all; it ends as melodrama." Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (London: BFI, 1987), 267. Delamater, "'Once More, from the Top': Musicals the Second Time Around," in *Play It Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes*, ed. Andrew Horton and Stuart Y. McDougal (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1998), 90.
8. Dyer, "Between Parturition and Manufacture."
9. See Constance Rosenblum, *Gold Digger: The Outrageous Life and Times of Peggy Hopkins Joyce* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015).
10. There are rumors of other real-life inspirations for the director and newfound star, including silent film star Colleen Moore and head of First National Pictures, John McCormick. See Todd S. Purdum, "The Long Hollywood History of *A Star Is Born*," *The Atlantic*, October 7, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/10/star-born-endures-leads-like-barbra-streisand-and-lady-gaga/572374/.
11. This nickname was bestowed upon her after starring as a spirited shopgirl in the film *It* (Clarence G. Badger, 1927).
12. J. E. Smyth, "Hollywood 'Takes One More Look': Early Histories of Silent Hollywood and the Fallen Star Biography, 1932–1937," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 26, no. 2 (June 2006): 179–201.
13. Smyth, "Hollywood 'Takes One More Look,' " 182.
14. Smyth, "Hollywood 'Takes One More Look,' " 184.
15. Altman mentions that the film is based on the marriage of Ruby Keeler and Al Jolson in "Mr. and Mrs. Musical Entertainment of the Thirties." Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 265.
16. This becomes so commonplace in the decades after that a film that takes place in Hollywood/Los Angeles, but is not about the film industry—*Pretty Woman* (Gary Marshall, 1990)—begins and ends with a vagrant walking along the streets asking, "Everyone comes to Hollywood got a dream. What's your dream"?
17. While MGM had Judy Garland and Gene Kelly, Bing Crosby was under contract at Paramount, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers at RKO, and Doris Day at Warner Bros., among many other examples.
18. Steven Cohan, "Introduction," in *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*, ed. Steven Cohan (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 10.
19. For a defining work on the integrated musical, see John Mueller, "Fred Astaire and the Integrated Musical," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1984): 28–40.
20. Cohan, "Introduction," 13.
21. Cohan, "Introduction," 13.
22. McNally, *The Stardom Film*, 44.
23. Martin Shingler, *Star Studies: A Critical Guide* (New York: BFI), 68.
24. Jeanine Basinger, *The Star Machine* (New York: Vintage, 2009), 3.
25. Richard Dyer, *Stars*, new ed. (London: BFI, 2004), 16.
26. Lily Fife Donaldson, "Performing Performers: Embodiment and Intertextuality in the Contemporary Biopic," in *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, ed. Belen Vidal and Tom Brown (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 106.

27. Column by Rebecca Sun in Camille Paglia, "Sexism among the Star Is Borns."
28. Dyer, "Between Parturition and Manufacture."
29. Dyer, *Stars*, 42.
30. Basinger, *The Star Machine*, 10.
31. Richard Dyer, "*A Star Is Born* and the Construction of Authenticity," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 132–140.
32. See Mandy Merck, *Cinema's Melodramatic Celebrity: Film, Fame, and Personal Wealth* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2020), for a consideration of talent, celebrity, and morality.
33. John D. Shout, "The Film Musical and the Legacy of Show Business," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 24–25.
34. As pointed out by Dyer, this is a "false" point of view because the film never truly recreates his viewing position. It is, however, still important that Maine is in the scene "watching" Esther perform. Dyer, "*A Star Is Born* and the Construction of Authenticity," 138.
35. Jane Feuer, "The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 2, no. 3 (1977): 321.
36. Dyer, "Between Parturition and Manufacture."
37. This is a similar process to Elvis films that, according to Rick Altman, reach a point where the film "tourists, like the film audience, soon discover that Elvis' singing is what they have come to see and hear." *The American Film Musical*, 196.
38. Jerome Delamater also notes this bond between the coming together of the couple and the song in the 1976 film. Delamater, "'Once More, from the Top,'" 89.
39. There are multiple songs featured in *A Star Is Born* that are performed by Ally and Jackson, with the final song of the film, "I'll Never Love Again," a composition where Ally wrote the music and Jackson added the lyrics, being similar to "With One More Look at You" from the 1976 film.
40. There is a deleted scene from the 1976 version that explicity expresses Esther's songwriting talent that resurfaced when *A Star Is Born* was re-released on Netflix in 2018. In the scene, John Norman sees a music sheet in Esther's apartment and asks her to play the unfinished composition. After refusing many times, Esther eventually plays "Evergreen" on the guitar, humming along to the (at that point) lyricless song.
41. The "Woman in the Moon" performance also indicates nerves through Esther's timid opening bars of the song. However, as the song progresses, the nerves turn to confidence, with Esther delivering a powerhouse performance.
42. Jane Feuer, "The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," 322.
43. See Note 5.
44. These endings act as a return to the stage and a rebirth as Esther/Ally all appear on stage and there is an announcement of their new names: Mrs. Norman Maine (1954), Esther Howard Hoffman (1976), and Ally Maine (2018).
45. Delamater, "'Once More, from the Top,'" 91.
46. Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1993), 120.
47. Esther transitions from "With One More Look at You" to John Norman's popular song, "Watch Closely Now," which opened the film.
48. See Shearer for a discussion of *New York, New York* as a jazz musical that was shaped by an "image crisis" taking place in the city when the film was shot. Martha Shearer, "Sax and the City: *New York, New York* (Scorsese, 1977), Urban Decline and the Jazz Musical," *The Soundtrack* 6, no. 1–2 (March 2014): 53–66.

49. Cohan, *Hollywood by Hollywood*, 20.
50. Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 46.
51. Cohan, "Introduction," 10.
52. Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).
53. Deborah Cartmell and Ashley D. Polasek, "Introduction," in *A Companion to the Biopic*, ed. Deborah Cartmell and Ashley D. Polasek (Hoboken, NJ, and Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 1.
54. Dyer, *Stars*, 43.
55. Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 16–27.
56. Jane Feuer, "The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," 315.
57. The credit reads as: "Ms. Streisand's Clothes from . . . Her Closet."
58. For example, Jon Pareles wrote in the *New York Times* about the discord between Lady Gaga, a pop star, appearing in a film that argues for a "return to the past" where authenticity is presented as superior to modern pop. Jon Pareles, "In 'A Star Is Born,' Lady Gaga Pits Pop against Authenticity," *New York Times*, October 8, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/08/arts/music/lady-gaga-star-is-born-authenticity-pop.html.
59. During a heated argument, Bobby (Elliot) accuses Jackson of stealing his voice. At a later point in the film, Jackson cruelly tells Ally that his father had more talent in "his little finger than you have in your whole body." The film audience, however, is never given the opportunity to hear the father's music.
60. Feuer, "The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," 318.
61. Dyer, "*A Star Is Born* and the Construction of Authenticity," 138.
62. Dyer, "*A Star Is Born* and the Construction of Authenticity," 139.
63. Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 151.
64. Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 265–266.
65. Basinger, *The Star Machine*, 36.
66. Basinger, *The Star Machine*, 36.
67. Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," in *Only Entertainment* (London and New York: Routledge), 18.
68. Anna Morcom, *Hindi Film Songs and the Cinema* (Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 240.
69. Dyer, "Between Parturition and Manufacture."

## CHAPTER 18

# THE AUTEUR AS GHOST STAR

## *Vincente Minnelli's Framings of Judy Garland*

### RAYMOND KNAPP

Fans of film musicals know how important romantic costars can be in the formation of star personae.[1] These screen relationships are generally understood as a kind of exchange of favors: thus, as Katharine Hepburn reportedly said of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, he gave her class and she gave him sex appeal, whereas with Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland there was that Peter Pan–like determination to never grow up, mutually reinforced. But such codependency also imposes limits. Rogers's edgy earthiness grounded Astaire in more ways than one, leaving it to his solo numbers to escape gravity's pull, since—even apart from the potential awkwardness of misbehaving skirts—no one expected Rogers to dance on the ceiling. And Rooney's increasingly strained simulation of optimistic youth held Garland back from entering filmic adulthood, even while his simulations of emotional maturity fell increasingly short of the expressive depth of her singing.[2] Inevitably, even as such extended onscreen partnerships helped sustain careers, their individual members often felt their constrictive pinch. And so do we today: encouraged by what we know from their other films, and even while watching these illustrious pairs in action, we are too often left to imagine an Astaire less beholden to his costar's more limited dancing abilities, a Rogers freer to develop her comic genius unfettered by Astaire's less than crackling personality, or—more to the point here—a Garland allowed to blossom more naturally into adulthood, with a more sustained sense of emotional security.

In this chapter, I interpret director Vincente Minnelli as a different kind of costar for Garland, one who was as given to camp as Rooney, but who turned that dimension into a kind of loving, liberating frame in their six filmic collaborations across the 1940s: *Babes on Broadway* (1941; "ghost theater" sequence), *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *The Clock* (1945), *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946), *Till the Clouds Roll By* (1946; "Look for the Silver Lining" and "Who"), and *The Pirate* (1948). In part, Minnelli freed Garland from not only Busby Berkeley's frame-breaking style of camp, but also from song itself, as her performances in the middle films from this series aim increasingly for a kind of actorly realism.

Notably, however, this more actorly element is itself framed by an overarching camp sensibility, emerging directly out of camp in their first collaboration and never quite escaping its gravitational pull, as camp reasserts itself with a vengeance in their final collaboration. Indeed, this reassertion of a strong, self-aware camp sensibility makes this film crucial to Minnelli's status as an *auteur*.[3]

Given the controversies concerning the *auteur* theory, it may be useful to recount two of its most prevalent claims here: (1) the many collaborations in films are (or should be) most actively shaped by its director, who may thereby establish a consistent sense of the "world" a film brings into being (its style and tone, its look and sound, its possibilities and limitations, its behavioral modes, its point of view, its sensibilities, etc.); and (2) that the degree to which a director achieves this consistency in the finished film relates directly to its value as art.[4] That said, a useful way to account for the sometimes drastic differences among those who debate *auteurism* is to relocate its purview—as most productive discussions of camp now do—from something invested in its object to a receptive sensibility. As Dan Sallitt reframes the question in "Auteurism Is a Taste, Not a Theory":

> No two people who call themselves auteurists will agree on what the term implies. I persist in regarding auteurism as an aesthetic taste, or rather a collection of aesthetic tastes that are somehow related to the concept of film direction.[5]

This critical realignment of perspective matters, especially for *The Pirate*, precisely because of Minnelli's involvement in all aspects of the film, and the consequent alignment of camp with his directorial style, particularly in its visual realm, as Matthew Tinkcom argues.[6]

Across Minelli's work with Garland, the camp element is ubiquitous, even without the support of music. Early on, during "ghost theater," she ambitiously assumes the guise of Sarah Bernhardt performing her most famous "pants" role, the eponymous *L'Aiglon* ("the Eaglet"), delivering not a song, but a dramatic speech, in French—overt camp that nonetheless gestures strongly toward serious drama. Three years later, *St. Louis* loses its bearings as a musical, only *just* recovering with Garland's "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas"—a song, born of desperation, that inspires its lone audience within the film to hysterical violence against the fragile fantasy the song and its singer yearn toward. *The Clock* is not a musical at all, marking the series' fullest "escape" from the film musical's campy gravitational field, but retaining nevertheless both the underlying desperation and the moments of sweet release that shape Garland's musical sensibilities. In *Ziegfeld Follies*, during "A Great Lady Has an Interview"—Garland's lone appearance in the film—she withholds her full singing voice until near the end, when it emerges, after some coaxing, above the male chorus's "Hallelujah" to lead them through the number's extended coda. Completing the symmetry of their collaborations, after Minnelli's direction of Garland's numbers in Richard Whorf's *Till the Clouds Roll By*, *The Pirate* seems in many ways the reversal of *St. Louis*, its inborn camp only gradually allowing it to confirm that the film actually is a musical, after all.

Camp thus provides a historical frame for Minnelli's series of collaborations with Garland, managing and perhaps masking the serious intentions at its core: to allow Garland to emerge as an actor of some accomplishment. But this exterior framing is more than a figure, since internal frames—though insufficiently explored as a topic in film musicals—serve as an integral part of the visual aesthetic Minnelli brings to the films and sequences he made with and for Garland, deriving from the detailed planning and careful execution characteristic of Minnelli's approach to filmmaking.[7] From the beginning, during "ghost theater," frames allow Garland a more centered space in which to bloom, while deftly sabotaging Rooney's more centrifugal camp style. Overt frames regulate the story in *St. Louis*, even as more subtle framing sets Garland herself off as its most cherished element. Frames insist on the possibility of repose throughout *The Clock*, before finally providing that repose in a manner directly recalling the more intimate moments in *St. Louis*. In both *Ziegfeld Follies* and *Till the Clouds Roll By*, Minnelli's frames work against the long line (if there is one in the former case) while also serving Garland (and, for *Ziegfeld Follies*, also Astaire) particularly well. And *The Pirate* puts *both* Garland and Gene Kelly in the frame, so that each might be loved lavishly, even to excess. Throughout the series, frames serve as a visual element corresponding to the generic aural framing of song and dance, creating many possibilities: for contemplation, for both establishing and managing a multifaceted camp element, for containing the despair that lurks beneath the best of these films (lest there be any doubt: *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *The Clock*, and *The Pirate*), for making release, when it does come, particularly satisfying. Nevertheless, directorial frames, like onscreen relationships, constrain as they liberate. After delineating how Minnelli's frames bring Garland to cinematic maturity and back again, I will in my conclusion suggest how his liberation of Garland may also have played a part in her undoing. Given the focus of this volume and the unusual configuration of their collaborations, I will proceed in two main sections ("acts"), focusing respectively on *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *The Pirate*, with briefer considerations of their other work together in an opening "overture" and a transitional "intermission."

## OVERTURE: CAMP MANAGEMENT IN *BABES ON BROADWAY*

> "Judy Garland . . . is not a star turned into camp, but a star who expresses camp attitudes."
>
> —Richard Dyer[8]

Already in the "ghost theater" sequence, Minnelli's first directorial assignment in a Hollywood musical, he uses framing to govern the received sense of the film's world, including its camp dimension.[9] Particularly striking in this sequence is how the film's world shifts in sensibility even while outwardly maintaining thematic and performative continuity. Central to this shift is how quickly it establishes a new camp environment drastically at odds with the rest of the film, accomplished mainly through framing, lighting, and graceful camera movement, the last of which effectively provides Garland with a movable frame.

The sequence begins and ends with a darkened shot of the grotesque face of a warrior figure in a long-abandoned theater that Tommy and Penny (played by Rooney and Garland) hope to reclaim as a venue for their show (▶ Video example 18.1). The camera pans to the couple entering from the back and advancing to the edge of the stage, where Tommy expounds on the ghosts that haunt all theaters, setting up a series of brief individual numbers based on faded theatrical posters—the most overt "framing" device in the sequence—using elaborate costuming and makeup to evoke the original performers in each role.

In line with the film's thematic engagement with the ongoing war in Europe, this sequence draws on a theatrical "melting pot" representative of the United States and its prospective allies. Each of its performances strongly suggests a national or ethnic identity integral to Broadway's theatrical heritage, including authors or performers who are French, Irish-American, Scottish, and English. In pursuing an inclusive yet partisan diversity, the sequence may be seen to complement other "American" types included in the film, as well as other "imports," extending to an occasional bit of gender-bending both in this sequence and elsewhere, with Garland's "pants" role matched later by Rooney's drag version of Carmen Miranda and Garland's Mr. Tambo during the film's notorious minstrel sequence.[10]

Despite these attempts to integrate the sequence into the film, it stands stubbornly apart, creating its own world in terms of look, shaping, style of movement, and—above all—its camp basis, which for the rest of the film is fairly typical for its director Busby Berkeley. Berkeley's camp sensibility is one of exuberant excess, characteristically expressed through the breaking of frames; in *Babes on Broadway*, this camp sensibility is manifest in the way exaggeration and discontinuity call attention to themselves and to the constructed nature of the filmic experience. Contrasting with this essentially centrifugal presentation of camp's excess, Minnelli offers a more centripetal camp, deriving from framing and meticulous refinement of detail.[11] Minnelli's camp trades on a strong sense of possession, in terms both of *self*, evident in a strongly defined personal taste, and of the exotically rendered *performances* being committed to film, designed to be savored. Within camp's penchant for both having and eating its cake, Minnelli's emphasis is on the former, while Berkeley's is on the latter.

Minnelli's approach to camp seems calculated to drive a wedge between Garland and Rooney, as her restrained performances make his appear grotesque in comparison. For example, Garland performs George M. Cohan's "Mary Is a Grand Old Name" in perfect alignment with Minnelli's style of presentation, rooted in graceful physical restraint, superb vocal delivery, and costuming suitable to both the period and the ghostly environment; thus, her gown's cobwebby fabric is balanced on either side by a black feathery fan and a white diaphanous kerchief, and the ensemble topped by an elaborate, multitoned feathered headdress (▶ Image example 18.1). That we are to savor the performance/

presentation is evident even before she performs a modest set of dance twirls after the first chorus. As the camera pans smoothly in for a close-up during the song's early stages, the contrast of her fair face and shoulders with the surrounding darker tones of hat, gown, and background is given ample play, the brightness of the former both softened by lighting and given sharper emphasis by the tight black collar around her throat, which also draws attention to—and, perhaps, betokens possession of—the source of her exquisite voice (▶ Video example 18.2). The containment symbolized by the collar is then echoed during the closing bars of the number by her deployment of her shadowy fan, which alternately obscures and reveals her face before performing the same maneuver on the next poster—by way of transition, but also making a direct connection between Garland's self-framing and the sequence's basic framing device.

More daring is Garland's Bernhardt/Napoleon II from *L'Aiglon*, a decidedly odd selection unlikely to be recognized by more than a tiny fraction of the intended audience. Indeed, many assume that the text is drawn from "*La Marseillaise*"; few notice she is in drag, and fewer still recognize the text. The recitation is, in all these senses, ideal for camp expression, since the actual content is so obscure, implicitly lending support to Richard Dyer's claim about Garland's "camp attitudes" (see epigraph). The number functions almost as pure gesture, both physical and verbal, so that it scarcely matters whether we regard the performance as "good" or "bad" in conventional terms (▶ Video example 18.3).[12] As she shifts declamatory poses, we become more acutely aware instead of how much the camera movement matters to the number, how actively the camera *possesses* Garland, as indeed its caressing movements have throughout the sequence possessed Garland in a way that would simply be impossible with Rooney, given the way he threatens to break the frame in each of his solo turns. Indeed, Rooney's manic busyness is perhaps the only real link to the Berkeley camp aesthetic that the "ghost theater" sequence otherwise leaves behind.

## Act I: Framing Color in *Meet Me in St. Louis*

Meet Me in St. Louis . . . *is a musical that even the deaf should enjoy.*
—*Time*, November 27, 1944[13]

Much has been written about Minnelli's use of frames in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, usually in reference to his earlier work as a window-dresser, the Thomas Eakins–inspired seasonal greeting cards used to frame the story, his intricately choreographed camera and boom work, the care he took to frame and light Judy Garland's face (understood retroactively as a component of their nascent romantic attachment), and, more generally, his painstaking attention to detail—for many a palpable token of his closeted homosexuality.[14] Yet the full measure has scarcely been taken of his ubiquitous deployment of this device, which ranges from obvious to subtle, and is always thematically meaningful. The variety of means is in itself remarkable; among the most often employed frames are windows, doorways, mirrors, window curtains, dining room curtains, clothing (especially hats), groupings of people, vehicles (buggy, ice wagon, trolley), trees, architectural features (columns, pillars, balustrades, staircase balusters), and furniture (cabinet, piano, tables, bed footboard). Foregrounds and backgrounds also often act as frames, as does, more generally, the play of light and shadow.

The film's frames constantly interact with its themes, which in turn flow from its fairly thin storyline, derived from a series of autobiographical vignettes published during 1941 and 1942 in the *New Yorker* ("5135 Kensington," by Sally Benson, the real-life "Tootie"), centering episodically on the activities of the Smith family during the year preceding the 1904 World's Fair.[15] The household—which includes Mr. and Mrs. Smith (Alonzo and Anna), Grandpa, Katie the maid, and the five children, Lon (Alonzo Jr.), Rose, Esther, Agnes, and Tootie—is overbalanced toward women and girls, emphasized through key pairings established early on: Anna and Katie, who run the kitchen; the two older girls, each angling toward romance (Rose with Warren Sheffield, who is away at school, and Esther with John Truett, the "boy next door," at first only speculatively); and the two younger girls, who share a taste for the macabre.

The family is made to seem mildly dysfunctional, owing mainly to Mr. Smith's lack of involvement, but appears otherwise blithely content throughout the first extended segment ("Summer 1903"), which includes nine of the film's eleven sung musical numbers and two main events: a dance party hosted by Rose and a similarly youth-oriented trolley ride to visit the construction site for the World's Fair, sequences that provide occasions for Esther to pursue John Truett ("Over the Bannister") and celebrate his tardy arrival for an outing ("The Trolley Song"). The second segment ("Autumn 1903") consists of an extended Halloween sequence with Agnes and Tootie, after which both of the family's potential sources of trouble erupt: an injured Tootie gives a lying account of John Truett trying to kill her, followed soon after by Alonzo's announcement of a promotion that will take the family to New York. While the former is quickly resolved when it becomes clear that Tootie's injuries were sustained during a dangerous Halloween prank (during which John protected Tootie and Agnes from discovery by the police), the latter portends disaster for the rest of the family's hopes and sense of security. But they come together by the end of the evening, reconciled through the only song in this segment, "You and I," presented as an old favorite that Anna, at the piano, induces Alonzo to sing.

Through most of "Winter 1903," the Smiths seem gamely ready to move to New York. Despite early misunderstandings and disappointments, the romances of the three older Smith children advance during the Christmas Ball, now including Lon's soon-to-be affianced Lucille Ballard. But afterward, Esther's "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas"—the only song in this segment—unleashes a hysterical reaction from Tootie, allowing Alonzo finally to see that the prospect of moving to New York has brought his family to the brink of catastrophe and despair. His decision to stay in St. Louis, which he announces just after midnight on Christmas morning, restores the family's stability and optimism, briefly celebrated in the short, song-less "Spring 1904" as the family visits the newly opened World's Fair, a final chapter that emphasizes—with special poignancy for its wartime audiences—the restoration of family and community following separations both real and projected.

As Esther, the middle of the five Smith children and principal star of the film, Judy Garland is the film's centerpiece, and arguably the most lovingly framed throughout. She makes her first appearance in the film through a window frame singing the title song as she returns from a tennis outing (the song having already been traded between Agnes and Grandpa); shortly thereafter, Esther inserts herself between her mother and Katie, who serve as her frame in the kitchen, then moves to the porch to conspire with Rose as they frame John Truett in the background between them (see Figure 18.1; ▶ Image examples 18.2, 18.3). Thus, already, establishing a pattern that will continue to unfold,

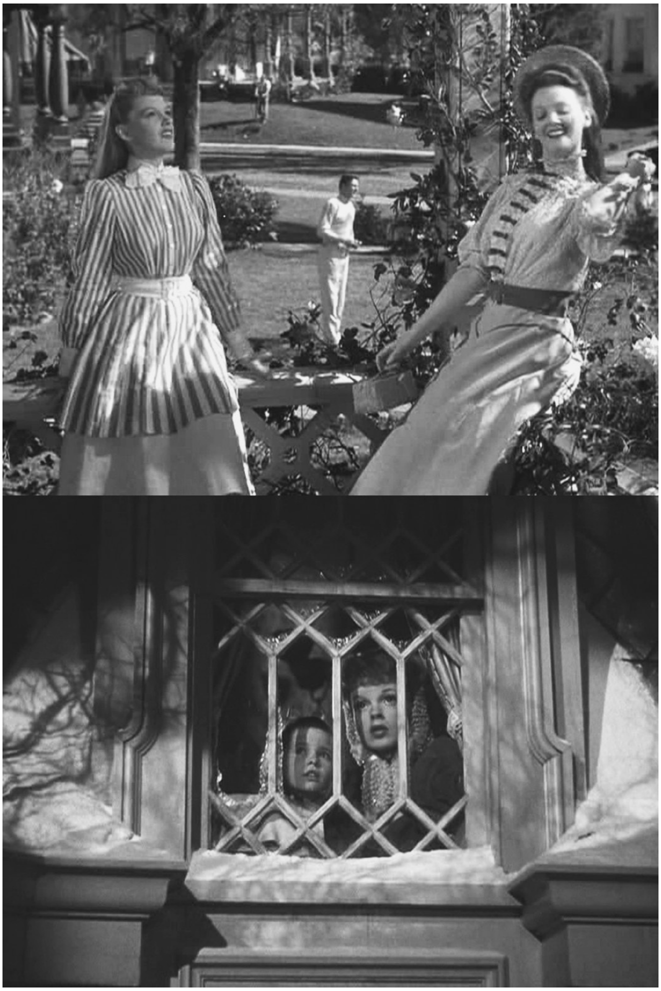

**FIGURE 18.1** Sample frames from *Meet Me in St. Louis*. Top: John Truett in the frame (Summer); bottom: sisters in the frame (Winter).

the most striking framings are thematic and story-driven. The two human frames reinforce the central feminine pairings within the household, and those they frame (Esther and John) represent the film's core romantic couple. Throughout the film, frames will be mainly used either to focus on key story moments, as in these early instances, or to choreograph the film's musical numbers.

Thus, for example, framing for "The Boy Next Door"—which begins just after the sequence just described—is both literal and structural. As the music begins, the window curtains frame Esther while she descends the staircase and looks out toward John's house; she leaves the window briefly to preen and dance within the frame of a nearby mirror, but then returns to the window, drawing the gauzy curtain across her face as the song concludes, much as she drew the fan across her face in "Mary," described earlier (▶ Video example 18.4). Tootie's introduction, immediately following, is doubly framed by the ice wagon, as she sings "Brighten the Corner Where You Are" from the open back before joining Mr. Neely in the front for the first of a series of her macabre and solipsistic conversations (▶ Image examples 18.4, 18.5). Then, as Esther and Rose perform the title song in the parlor, Esther is first framed between Rose and the piano, and then between the windows as she dances; later in the song, as Rose adds her voice to Esther's in a descant, Esther brings her head near Rose's within a much-admired shot that includes, in a kind of mirroring, a sculpture atop the piano depicting a pair of lovers (▶ Image examples 18.6, 18.7, 18.8).[16]

The latter shot, like the earlier use of the older sisters to frame John, establishes an early trope of using frames to emphasize sisterly connections, with three significant pairings emerging: Rose and Esther (the older pair), Agnes and Tootie (the younger pair), and Esther and Tootie (the film's top-billed stars). Thus, after their early scenes together on the porch and in the parlor, Rose and Esther are framed in the dressing-table mirror for an entire scene just before Rose's dance party, a sequence that is echoed in the parallel scene during Winter, when, just before the Christmas Ball, Rose corsets Esther behind the elaborate brass footboard of her bed, after which Esther is framed first in the love seat and then in the dresser mirror (▶ Image examples 18.9, 18.10, 18.11, 18.12). Agnes and Tootie, whose tendencies toward the macabre will take center stage in the Halloween sequence, are framed behind the stairway balusters as Rose's party gets under way (▶ Image example 18.13). And, immediately after, Esther and Tootie use the dining room curtains as a frame for their performance of "Under the Bamboo Tree," establishing what will emerge as the most important sisterly pair (▶ Image example 18.14).

Thus, it is Esther who carries Tootie home after her accident, and Esther's nightgown that Tootie insists on wearing, in Esther's bed, to comfort her after getting her stitches. Although Tootie's lies about John may seem unforgiveable—Esther seems about to spank her just after learning the truth—the two sisters easily come back together during "You and I": framed between a table lamp and a column, Tootie still wearing her older sister's nightgown, Esther first moves Tootie's hands away from her cake, but then immediately begins feeding it to her with her fork (▶ Image examples 18.15, 18.16). As their parents begin singing in harmony, the two reconciliations are shown together ("time goes by, but we'll be together"), mirroring each other, with Anna—who has been the agent of the family's reconciliation—framed in the foreground between her daughters and husband before the camera zooms in to isolate Anna and Alonzo in the scene's closing shot (▶ Image examples 18.17, 18.18). Later, in the "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" sequence, Tootie and Esther are framed by Tootie's bedroom window (see Figure 18.1), lit by John's window across the way until he draws the curtain, which symbolically dims Tootie's window for the remainder of the sequence (▶ Image example 18.19). As the sisters talk and look out on the snow family they had created earlier in the day, now set aglow by the house lights, Esther begins to sing the song that will reduce Tootie first to tears and then to hysterics (▶ Video example 18.5).The song is framed throughout by the window curtains, beginning with the two directly facing each other, but individual shots of them midway through emphasize their desperate separateness, with Esther's face framed by her sparkly snow hat, her necklace, and the left window curtain as she looks upward as if in prayer, then Tootie's by the bow in her hair, her nightshirt, and the right window curtain as she looks down at the snow family, tears streaming down her face.

The separations of sisters within many of the later sequences are themselves thematic, anticipating the realignment of the older siblings into couples, already presaged in the mirroring of Rose and Esther by the art nouveau lovers atop the piano, described above. At Halloween, Rose arrives home in the company of Colonel Darly, an apparently brief—and one-sided—infatuation. In the corseting sequence, Esther is already in her own world, thinking more of John than of Rose's more difficult situation with Warren (who is attending the dance with Lon's girlfriend Lucille)—hence her separation from Rose for the love seat and mirror framings. More dramatically, halfway through "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," as Esther turns away from singing to Tootie ("once again, as in olden days"), the focus of her singing—and thinking—also seems to shift, now more about her pending separation from John, whose marriage proposal she has just accepted even though neither believes it will reach fruition. It is her retreat into her own troubles that leads her not to notice how upset Tootie is becoming until she blubbers and runs outside to destroy the snow family in a fit of hysteria; as she passes their father on the darkened staircase, he stops in front of a discolored rectangle where a picture used to hang (▶ Image example 18.20).

It was on this very staircase, similarly darkened, that Esther sang "Over the Bannister" to John, climaxing a sequence that had framed the two of them with increasing intimacy as they extinguished the house lights. John's inability to follow through after the song with the expected kiss—he shakes Esther's hand vigorously instead, complimenting her on her "mighty strong grip . . . for a girl"—sets up their first kiss as a kind of inverted reprise following her assault and subsequent apology on Halloween (prompted, in turn, by Tootie's lies and their exposure). The reprise function of the apology scene's ending is clarified by reversed verbal references to the earlier sequence—*he* now pretends to seek *her* help turning out the lights because he is afraid of mice, whereas *she* compliments *him* on his "mighty strong grip . . . for a boy," references that temporally frame their kiss, which is visually framed by the columns on John's porch (▶ Video example 18.6). They will kiss again in the proposal scene, beneath a tree whose branches and trunk provide an embracive frame for their coupling only as he pulls her in for their kiss; as they pull away and slowly realize the proposed marriage may never happen, the tree's trunk seems to come between them, its branches no longer visible until, during their final, desperately brief embrace, a hint of the frame returns as a kind of visual echo (▶ Video example 18.7).

Among the film's varied returns and reprises, the staircase figures prominently, especially so in the climactic scenes of the first three seasonal segments, in each case involving a different framing principle. But perhaps the most ubiquitous framing props are the film's hats. Hats are already prominent, as both props and frames, in the "ghost theater" sequence of *Babes on Broadway*, not only in "Mary" (▶ Image example 18.1) but also, and even more spectacularly, in Garland's version of "Rings on My Fingers" (▶ Image example 18.21). Grandpa is the first character in *St. Louis* whose hats invite attention (he wears three different hats during his part in the title song), but Esther has her fair share throughout, and even her lack of a hat will matter, thanks to the emphasis given to her hair from the outset. (When she first appears in the kitchen, having just removed the hat she had worn as she said farewell to her tennis group, her mother reminds her to wash her hair, and Esther again refers to her hair in front of the mirror in the pre-party scene.) Perhaps because of these reminders, or perhaps because this is a new look for Garland, throughout the Summer segment it is her lustrous auburn hair that draws the eye, so much so that her straw hat hardly touches her head during her cakewalk with Tootie. She remains the only girl *not* wearing a hat during "The Trolley Song" ("my hair piled high upon my head"), where she is alternately isolated, anxious because of John's lateness, and, during her share of the song as he runs to catch up, iconically framed by her colorful cohort, all sporting wide-brimmed "Merry Widow" hats (indeed, she has to borrow a nearby male's hat to act out the line "He tipped his hat"; ▶ Image examples 18.22, 18.23). Tootie and Agnes have elaborate costume hats for the Halloween sequence. Esther's removal of her hat during "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" becomes its own moment, revealing not only her hair but also her pearl necklace and red party dress.

Reversing the trajectory of dissipating sisterly frames, in the early couple-related framings it is each pair's separateness that is first emphasized. John is framed, as noted, between the foregrounded older sisters, at a distance. The phone that promises to connect Rose with Warren is portentously framed between Anna and Rose as the entire family is seated at the dinner table (▶ Image example 18.24). During their phone call, Warren's face is doubly framed by his hat and the oval telephone booth window at Delmonico's, emphasizing his remoteness as the two shout and struggle to hear the other, he over the noisy background, Rose distracted by the mostly silent presence of her family (▶ Image examples 18.25, 18.26). By the end of "The Trolley Song," Esther and John become the family's first new couple to stabilize, framed—if still uneasily—between the trolley's poles and beneath its fringe (▶ Image example 18.27). Much later, as Rose and Esther conspire at the Christmas Ball, the ballroom's entrance curtains frame Warren and Lucille's arrival in a gap between other guests (▶ Image example 18.28). Then, as Lucille intervenes to realign the couples according to their actual inclinations, a visual game of mix and match ensues, with Rose framed between newcomer Lucille and Warren, Grandpa between Lon and Lucille, and (after a group shot) Esther between Lucille and Rose before the latter two abandon Esther to join Lon and Warren (▶ Image examples 18.29, 18.30, 18.31, 18.32).

While couples form and sisterly pairs fade (to an extent), the family as a whole remains a constant presence, although only in the end comfortably accepting Alonzo as more than its figurative head. Each season includes a significant family gathering: at the dinner table in Summer, reconciled at the end of Halloween ("You and I"), reconstituted on Christmas morning (with Warren making a surprise awkward appearance to announce his betrothal to Rose), and, in Spring, framed at the balustrade overlooking the "Louisiana Purchase Exhibition" (the official name of the World's Fair). Of these, the Halloween and Christmas gatherings are especially noteworthy, carefully framed to form a related pair, each activated by an announcement from Alonzo. Thus, as Alonzo makes his Halloween announcement, Rose is first framed by Anna and Esther, with Grandpa (holding Tootie on his lap) framed by Agnes and Katie, each grouping seated together. These groupings then shift in agitation after the news of their impending move takes hold. Within the first grouping, Rose and Esther stand up, framing Anna on either side, Anna's arm around Esther; Rose then stands between Anna and a reseated Esther, her hand on Esther's shoulder; Anna sits between her daughters as Esther—clearly the most agitated, having just received her first kiss from John—stands and then sits; Rose then stands between mother and sister, her hand again on Esther's shoulder, before moving slightly to stand behind her mother (▶ Image examples 18.33, 18.34, 18.35, 18.36, 18.37, 18.38, 18.39, 18.40). Each change in configuration carries separate gestures of support: mother, then sister comfort Esther, both sisters support their mother, Rose again comforts Esther. Quite different groupings assemble for the Christmas announcement: Rose, Anna, Agnes, and Grandpa in one grouping, Esther, Tootie, and Lon in the other (▶ Image examples 18.41, 18.42). But the two sequences have one thing in common: Alonzo himself is isolated. Yet, by evening's end, in each sequence, Alonzo and Anna come together in the foreground, harmonizing for Halloween, in quietude for Christmas, as the family frames them each time with an active background, centering quietly on cake and cribbage in the first, and noisily on exchanging and opening presents in the second (▶ Video examples 18.8, 18.9).

At the end of each of these sequences, significantly, it is Alonzo who joins Anna to reconstitute the center of the family, but his journey to that position is each time accomplished quite differently. Following his Halloween announcement, he isolates himself in his "pouting" chair (we've seen him pouting there before, in Summer), framed between curtains and cabinet, and by the table in the foreground (▶ Image examples 18.43, 18.44). But when we see him again after Anna begins to play the piano, the angle and lighting are subtly different, as if brightened by the music (▶ Image example 18.45). As he joins her at the piano, he continues to remain somewhat unsettled, relaxing only in stages after Anna puts it down in "his key" (cuing the orchestra to enter in the background). As he leans closer to the piano after the song's first phrases, a framed view of the staircase opens up between Anna and him, with Rose extending Anna's side of the frame as she enters and stands at the top, descending only after the younger sisters, followed by Esther, descend into the frame, all making what amount to staged entrances. Finally, as Anna's voice joins Alonzo's, he moves a chair over and sits beside her, once again framed, now more intimately, between Anna and the piano for the remainder of the scene, which ends with just the two of them completing the final lyric, "you and I" (▶ Video example 18.10).

For the Christmas sequence, Alonzo is at first similarly isolated, against the discolored wallpaper above the staircase, then at the open window looking down as Esther attempts to comfort Tootie amid the broken snow people (▶ Image example 18.46). But now, perhaps for the first time, he seems actually to be paying attention, both to his daughters and, slightly later, to the house's topsy-turvy condition, as he descends the stairs lost in thought, past the discolored wallpaper, which he seems to notice for the first time. As Esther takes Tootie upstairs in the background, he moves past his "pouting" chair and chooses instead a plush armchair (▶ Image example 18.47). We see him make his decision as he begins to light his cigar; having decided, he leaps into action, calling the family together and then pacing in front of them as he tells them he has decided they will stay in St. Louis (▶ Image examples 18.48, 18.49). Yet he is still isolated; it is only after Warren appears and leaves that he is able to rejoin his family in congratulating Rose on her engagement (▶ Image example 18.50). At the end of the scene, noticing Anna has moved apart from the family, he joins her in the foreground. There is no settling in this time, as there was with "You and I"; he knows his place is beside Anna, so quietly moves to her side, covering her hand with his and, as she turns aside, calmly walking around her; although it is she who then falls into his arms, it is this time he who has orchestrated their coming together, framed by their family in the background excitedly exchanging presents (▶ Video example 18.9).

Even though the final segment has no song of its own, its function is almost musical in its use of recollection as a closing gesture, a kind of miniature reprise-coda beginning with the now-extended family (though without Katie) reprising the kind of cheerful disarray that launched the three previous segments, now heading out to the fair. Enhancing the chaotic feel of the opening, all the Smith women are dressed in white, including elaborate Easter bonnets that do more to obscure their individuality than to frame their faces (Lucille alone is easily distinguishable, dressed in pastel yellow). Even when they assemble, they seem a rather disorganized mob, although, notably, Alonzo and Anna are clearly identifiable at the center of that mob (▶ Image example 18.51). Only the dramatic fanfare and lighting of the pavilion restores order, leading them all to the balustrade, well-sorted for a final group of framed portraits: the older couples, Lucille, Lon, Anna, and Alonzo; Rose and Warren; Agnes, Grandpa, and Tootie; and Esther and John (▶ Image examples 18.52, 18.53, 18.54, 18.55).

* * *

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the visual framing in *St. Louis* is the cumulative effect it seems to have on Garland's singing, which is notably subdued in relation to her signature belting style. This is not entirely new for her, to be sure; "Somewhere over the

Rainbow" is a ready example of how easily framing (some of it sonic) could curb her tendency to let go. James Naremore (citing Richard Dyer) observes that this more subdued style aligns her singing with the "small-town values she embodied" better than in her films with Rooney.[17] But it may also stem from the way that visual framing is made to control the sonic realm in *St. Louis*. During the early phone call, Warren's framed distance encourages the family—along with Katie, framed in the serving window—to listen in, and Rose to shout (▶ Image example 18.56). That "The Trolley Song" may be seen as an exception to the general subdued level of her singing in the film (according to Naremore, it is the only song she belts) may simply be ascribed to its being a rare outdoor number. Another arguable exception is her duet version of the title song, which may (again, arguably) be understood in terms of her father's perspective, so that we hear her exuberance as if through his ears ("For heaven's sake, stop that screeching!"; ▶ Video example 18.11). But we might more usefully consider the point of a more subdued singing style in this film to betoken a new level of filmic intimacy for Garland, as part of a new "actorly" manner of acting. This is particularly true in "Over the Bannister," whose intimacy is as much a matter of lighting as overt framing. Thus, the device of moving through the darkening house, turning out the lights, already relates the sonic to the visual directly, culminating an increasingly intimate post-party progression from bustle to quietude as the guests leave, from light into shadows, and from separation to proximity, especially when, during the song, Esther descends the stairway to face John Truett within a single frame. John has been our proxy until this moment, stammeringly in awe of Esther's beauty—her face lit by each dimming lamp in turn, the reduced lighting then circling around her auburn hair, creating a double halo for her softly bedimmed features—and cajoling her into prolonging the moment through song. Although one is likely to remember "Over the Bannister" less as a song and more for its surrounding qualities and John's comic inability to follow through, its somewhat stilted lyric and sweetly arched melodic lines fully support those qualities, especially by providing Judy Garland's voice and exquisitely nuanced visual delivery the opportunity to provide the aural equivalent for the caresses John is too timid to offer (▶ Video example 18.12).

## Intermission: *The Clock*, *Till the Clouds Roll By*, *Ziegfeld Follies*

> Though Garland doesn't sing a note, in Vincente's hands *The Clock* plays like a musical with the numbers excised.
>
> —Mark Griffin[18]

*The Clock* is the first non-musical film credited to either producer Arthur Freed or director Vincente Minnelli, but its overt use of frames is no less ubiquitous for that, and in some cases clearly related to Minnelli's approach in *St. Louis*.[19] Having New York City for a backdrop might have made composing through frames a default option for the film even if it were not already a strong inclination for its director, but that approach is also entirely in line with *The Clock*'s situational story of Corporal Joe Allen (played by Robert Walker) on forty-eight-hour leave during World War II, in a big city for the first time, smitten with the first young woman he meets (Alice Mayberry, played by Judy Garland). Everything is set up so that Joe, and then the couple, will contrast with their surroundings in every imaginable way, and framing is integral to Minnelli's making that contrast palpable. One particular recurring device, already familiar from *St. Louis*, is worth tracing here: framing a stationary foregrounded couple against a moving background.[20]

The first striking instance of this device occurs as Alice begins to respond more warmly to Joe, who has imposed himself on her after inadvertently breaking the heel of her shoe and helping her to get it repaired. As they sit together atop a moving streetcar, the camera shifts to an angled position, so that what had been a fairly steady background of a retreating street becomes a streaming field of sidewalk and storefronts, leaving them in the foreground as the frame's only stable element for an extended conversation (▶ Video example 18.13). Contrasts between movement and stillness continue to matter throughout the film; thus, after they say what they assume to be their final goodbyes after an outing in Central Park, Alice is on a bus headed home when she suddenly becomes aware of Joe running after the bus, first struggling to catch up, then briefly framed by her window. It is a particularly poignant sequence, emphasizing the fragility of their connection, apparently already severed but restored through his willingness to seem ridiculous to everyone except Alice, who is gratifyingly relieved to see Joe again, instantly agreeing to cancel her date that night for him (▶ Video example 18.14).

Minnelli continues to spin variations on this device throughout the film. When they reconnect that evening, it is in front of a revolving door, their foregrounded stillness framed by constant motion (▶ Video example 18.15). As they sit quietly at dinner later that evening, lights outside the restaurant window give the impression of constant background motion (▶ Video example 18.16). As a sonic correlative to this device, that evening while conversing quietly overlooking the river, they stop to listen, discovering a constant welter of urban sounds surrounding them—train whistles and horns, car horns and engines, a train moving over a track, sirens—a shared experience of occupying the quiet center of a bustling metropolis that leads them to their first embrace and kiss, impelled by a vocalized scoring that gradually replaces the sounds of the city (▶ Video example 18.17). It may be considered a lapse of judgment for Minnelli to allow the background scoring to emerge quite so forcefully here, particularly after making such a point of the couple quietly listening to the sounds around them.[21] Perhaps, though, the lapse may be understood as an extension of the musicals-based sensibility that pervades the film's visuals, without incurring the intrusive quality that such heavy-handed background music entails.

Two extended sequences drive the remaining plot, as Joe and Alice fulfill the delivery obligations of an incapacitated milkman, and later, having committed to each other, seek desperately to secure a marriage license before Joe must report back to duty. In between, after breakfast with the milkman and his wife, as they make the decision to spend his last day of leave together, the two stand facing each other in profile, first on the street with bustling morning foot traffic behind them, and then, in what we might call a "scene-melt"—with neither their positions nor their dialogue registering the shift—on the subway, the bustling street scene replaced by the lights of a station platform accelerating past them through the subway's windows (▶ Video example 18.18). Their decision to get married comes only after their precarious connection severs once again, this time through getting separated in the Times Square subway station, she taking a local and he trying to follow her on an express, with neither yet knowing the other's full name. Their reconnection, however improbable, seems nevertheless inevitable, both because they are in the end drawn to the staircase/escalator complex where they first met in Pennsylvania Station, and because their embrace, kiss, proposal, and acceptance all take place mid-stairway, humanity streaming behind them in both directions and at multiple velocities, since the framing background includes both up and down stairways and escalators (see Figure 18.2; ▶ Video example 18.19).[22]

Their quixotic quest to obtain blood tests and a marriage license in the few hours left to them succeeds against all odds. But during the extremely rushed civil ceremony, the city intrudes both visually and sonically within another framing of stationary foreground against moving background: the Justice's very words are swallowed up by a train speeding by behind him (▶ Video example 18.20). It is too much for Alice, who—despite their shared exhilaration in reaching their goal—rebels against the ugliness of the process and of the ceremony itself. Legally married but disconsolate after dinner in a public diner, they seek refuge in a church where a wedding has just taken place, organ music still playing as the altar boys extinguish the candles one by one. With them sitting in the front pew, shot from above and framed by the remaining lit candles and a gradually enveloping darkness, the scene strikingly recalls "Over the Bannister," and leads to a similar moment of shared intimacy. Within the embracing quietude of a medium close-up, they read through the marriage service one of the guests has left behind, reciting the marriage vows themselves within an extreme close-up. This sequence is as close to a musical number as the film comes, a solemn performance of the marriage ceremony that restores the reverence that the official ceremony lacked. As they begin the Lord's Prayer (see Figure 18.3), the medium close-up returns, and the contrast to the darker extreme close-up makes their faces seem brighter than before. Another shot of them from above provides a double symmetry to complete the scene: an altar boy finishes extinguishing the candles in the foreground as they sit quietly still in the background, in peaceful fulfillment (▶ Video example 18.21).

* * *

As noted, *The Clock* marks this series' fullest "escape" from the film musical's campy gravitational field, but depends no less than *St. Louis* on both Minnelli's careful framing and, from Garland, the kind of underlying, tremulous torment that she delivers in "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," typically followed with a sweet release that follows such expressions of despair but does not fully eclipse them. Both *Ziegfeld Follies* and *Till the Clouds Roll By*, despite being musicals, are outliers in comparison, since Minnelli's

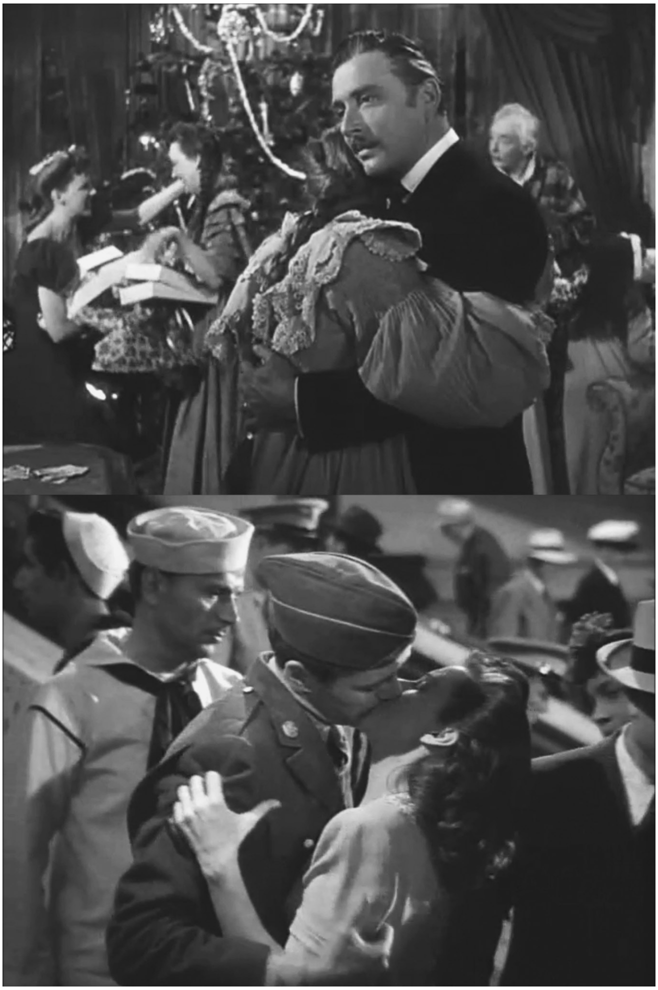

**FIGURE 18.2** Embracing couples framed by commotion. Top: Alonzo and Anna reconcile as Christmas gifts are exchanged (*Meet Me in St. Louis*); bottom: Joe and Alice reunite in Penn Station (*The Clock*).

frames in these films work against the long narrative lines needed for these aspects of Garland's musical personality to emerge with conviction, even though his adroit framing serves the musical numbers themselves quite well.

As Marilyn Miller in *Clouds*—a biopic of Jerome Kern—Garland has two numbers, both directed by Minnelli, which are, like the "ghost theater" sequence in *Babes on Broadway*, easily distinguished in style from the rest of the film. What is perhaps the most intriguing dimension of these numbers emerges when they are considered together. The better known of the two songs, "Who," works somewhat better in the rejected "intimate" version by newcomer Sally Hessler than in the big production number envisioned for the show's star, which can't overcome its own weight despite its expert use of color and

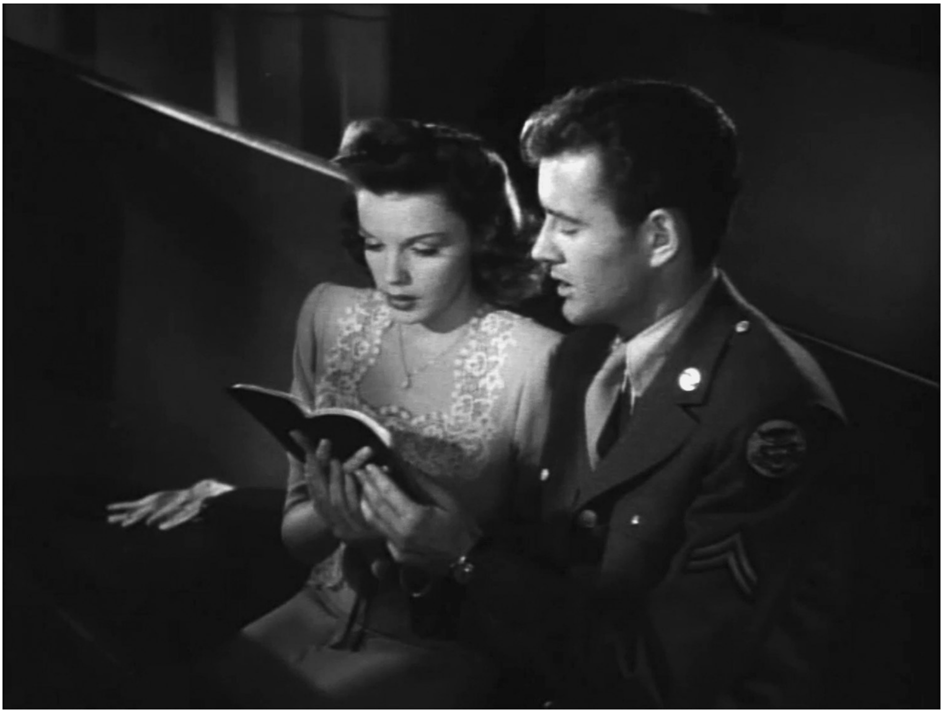

**FIGURE 18.3** Joe and Alice exchanging vows in *The Clock*.

framing.[23] Indeed, the production is almost worthy of Busby Berkeley, and the weight was literal: "Sunny," a big circus number used as a lead-in for "Who," includes elephants, along with a stunt double for Garland leaping astride a galloping white horse. But "Look for the Silver Lining" achieves an effective intimacy despite its overblown set, due in part to the simple effect of contrasting the full-stage opening shot, lighted by a widening vertical strip as the curtain opens, with medium close-ups framing Garland among the dishes she is scouring as she sings; this sets up the poetic ending to the song, with the closing curtains creating the effect of a veil-like shadow falling across her face, reminiscent of the end of "The Boy Next Door" (discussed above) (▶ Image examples 18.57, 18.58, 18.59).[24]

*Ziegfeld Follies* is a bizarre film, and Garland's "A Great Lady Has 'An Interview' " one of a series of bizarre, star-driven numbers that constitute the film, none relating to the others, each introduced by its own intertitle credit. Despite its oddity, the film has many fans, especially owing to its camp qualities and the intensity of such numbers as Fred Astaire's "Limehouse Blues," with Lucille Bremer, an excruciating exercise in "yellowface" that nevertheless compels through its layered surrealism, in which Astaire's Tai Long shares a near-death delirium-dance with Bremer's Moy Ling within an already surreal evocation of a dockside street scene.[25] Garland's "Interview" follows directly after, and there is no arguing that it is among her most accomplished camp outings. Reportedly written as "a sort of self-parody for Greer Garson," it was assigned to Garland when Garson declined.[26] Although Minnelli directed the number, almost everything about it was set up by writers Kay Thompson and Roger Edens, and by Charles Walters, who was given choreographic credit. Nevertheless, the use of door frames and posed tableaux beneath the unnamed star's portrait, combined with the striking use of human frames—particularly the shots of Garland near the end framed by the chorus boys' "jazz hands"—are vintage Minnelli (▶ Image examples 18.60, 18.61). Perhaps the most striking feature of the number is an extended sequence of revivalist call-and-responses between the star and the reporters, which has been credited with inspiring "Me and My Town" from Stephen Sondheim's *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964),[27] a style somewhat discomfiting when heard in relation to Garland's appearances in blackface a few years earlier. But it also makes an intriguing transition from her "dramatic speaking mode" to singing, as her voice dominates the concluding choruses.

*Ziegfeld Follies* was filmed in 1944, but not released until 1946, and so was filmed during the period after *St. Louis* when Minnelli and Garland were no longer together. After *The Clock* brought them back together both professionally and personally, she would perform in *Till the Clouds Roll By* while four months pregnant, and while Minnelli was already planning to make a musical out of the 1943 Lunt and Fontanne stage hit, *The Pirate*.[28]

## Act II: Framing Camp in *The Pirate*

> . . . a marvelously concocted plot . . . a musical without music. . . . It was great camp, an element that hadn't been intentionally used in films up to now . . . I say intentionally.
>
> —Vincente Minnelli[29]

The degree to which Hollywood film musicals before *The Pirate* were intentionally camp might be debated, but it seems improbable to assert—as Minnelli does with regard to his wish to make a film musical with Garland from the Theatre Guild's 1942 production of *The Pirate* (see epigraph)—that they neither consciously reflected the camp tastes of their makers, nor played to camp tastes among their audiences.[30] There is, however, a strong argument to be made that *The Pirate* represents a shift in this regard due to the centrality of its strong and self-aware camp sensibility. This (re-)emergence of that sensibility is especially important for this discussion—given the intertwined positions of this film and its director at an extended moment of crisis in Garland's personal life and career—because of camp's alliance with gay subcultures, especially strong during this period, and nowhere more intensely so than in the Freed unit at MGM, often referred to by the mocking sobriquet "Freed's Fairies."[31]

While Minnelli himself blames only Garland's increased drug dependency for her breakdown, and stresses his steadfast support, the most plausible trigger event for Garland, supported by persistent rumor (but no documentation), was that she caught her husband in bed with another man.[32] But perhaps she didn't need that specific trigger to rebel against Minnelli. She was pulled in varied and seemingly incompatible directions by the worlds she was drawn to inhabit: by her maturing ambitions as an actor-singer, to extend and deepen her mainstream, heterosexual appeal; by her own comic (read: *camp*) proclivities as a singer-actor, to play to her "cult" (read: *gay*) fan base; by the very environment she worked in, dominated most immediately by gay men, but within a wider world in denial about that environment and its affectations, though simultaneously distrustful of its "excesses"; by her need for a strong controlling presence—an *auteur*—in both her personal and professional lives; and by the very need to see all these worlds as reconcilable.

The consequences of her inability to manage the collision of these worlds, and Minnelli's centrality to them all, were both immediate and long-lasting. Filming on *The Pirate* was much delayed due to her prolonged absences from the set, which was often rife with festering conflict, due in part to jealousy regarding Minnelli's (working) relationship with Kelly.[33] In the aftermath of the filming, Minnelli was removed from the upcoming production of *Easter Parade* at Garland's request, and they would never again work together. She subsequently spent time in a sanitarium and, after being suspended from a succession of film projects (with the notable exception of *Summer Stock*, completed in 1950), she was fired by MGM and filed for divorce. Although many have seen in *The Pirate* sure signs of the turmoil that beset its creation, it seems more remarkable (to me, and to most writers who engage its camp dimension) that those signs are as few as they are. The film needs no apology on the basis of its production history, requiring only the capacity to engage the finished work with sympathy regarding both its camp dimension and the theatrical world it celebrates.

As Minnelli suggests, the "marvelously concocted" plot of Behrman's play was a perfect setup for camp. As rewritten for the screen, Manuela (Garland) is a susceptible young woman fixated romantically on the notorious pirate Macoco but affianced to Don Pedro (Walter Slezak), the stodgy middle-aged mayor of her small Caribbean village. Traveling to the port city to collect her trousseau, she encounters Serafin, the headlining actor/singer/dancer/acrobat for a small circus troupe, who is instantly smitten with her. Serafin manages to hypnotize her onstage, but she responds to his attempted seduction by singing a paean to Macoco ("Mack the Black"), creating a sensation and inspiring Serafin not only to woo her romantically but also to recruit her for his troupe. Following her to her village, he recognizes Don Pedro as Macoco and blackmails him into supporting his impersonation of the notorious pirate so that he might win Manuela. With Don Pedro's help, he convinces everyone in the town that he is Macoco, but after he summons Manuela to the mayor's house, where he has taken up occupancy, she learns of his deception, physically attacking him and even knocking him out before professing her love for him. Meanwhile, the real Macoco fetches the island's Viceroy, who arrests Serafin. As Serafin is about to be hanged as Macoco, Manuela discovers Don Pedro's true identity (recognizing her engagement ring as pirate loot), and, pretending to be hypnotized as part of Serafin's act, she verbally emasculates Don Pedro, goading him into revealing his true identity, freeing not only Serafin but also herself, as she is now able to pursue the life she wants with Serafin.

Framing in *The Pirate*, even apart from its musical numbers, is as systematic and as effective as in the examples already considered here, and contributes moreover to its camp appeal as directly as any of the more frequently noted dimensions of the film (among others, its acting, songs, musical arrangements, costumes, and sets), while also helping to manage and coordinate those other elements. For example, in early scenes the hilariously inconsequential Uncle Capucho (Lester Allen) is repeatedly framed in the background between Aunt Inez and Don Pedro (and later, between Aunt Inez and Manuela), just as sculptures, globes, and the like will be framed in later scenes between Don Pedro and Serafin, or between Manuela and Serafin (indeed, the presence of these improbable *objets d'art*, along with the elaborately colorful and equally improbable sets and costumes, turn all the film's framings toward camp) (▶ Image examples 18.62, 18.63, 18.64, 18.65, 18.66). Windows, balconies, and especially mirrors call attention to the constant posing of Manuela, Serafin, and Don Pedro, as well as perhaps pointing to the revolving mirrors in the device that Serafin will use to reveal Manuela's inner self through hypnotism ▶ Image examples 18.67, 18.68, 18.69).[34] Recalling the duet version of the title song in *St. Louis*, the film also abounds with shots of its actors posed alongside similarly posed sculptures, including repeated sculptural mirrorings with both Serafin and Manuela in her home, and three more with Serafin, each with a different sculpture, outside Don Pedro's house, and both before and during his fight with Manuela inside the house (▶ Image examples 18.70, 18.71, 18.72, 18.73, 18.74). Key scenes between Serafin and Manuela, and between Serafin and Don Pedro, take place in front of a large period map of the Caribbean (in the same room that sports a prominent globe), a constant reminder of the world that Manuela hopes to explore and that threatens to expose Don Pedro's past (▶ Image examples 18.75, 18.76, 18.77). Many framings produce familiar effects from earlier collaborations, such as surrounding Garland with a coterie of elaborately hatted and garbed young women (in the opening scene all framed within a garden trellis),[35] or isolating a person or couple before a moving background (▶ Image example 18.78). The latter is especially prominent in crowd scenes in the port city, where it is evoked again during "Mack the Black," a number that also imaginatively frames Garland among a seething ring of chorus/spectators (see Figure 18.4) and isolates her for a plaintive verse ("Evening Star") that recreates the intimate singing style she brought to *St. Louis*, a style also recalled in her "You Can Do No Wrong," sung with Kelly's head in her lap (▶ Image examples 18.79, 18.80, 18.81).

*The Pirate* also twice recalls, with telling effect, the scene-melts in both *St. Louis*, from postcard to live action, and *The Clock*, from street to subway, described earlier. In the first of these, a shot of Manuela's engagement ring, with her hand covering Aunt Inez's and Don Pedro's, is displaced by a shot of just her hands (she is now in her nightgown), fetishizing the ring as another of Minnelli's *objets d'art*, while also suggesting a period of continuing contemplation in a more private space, and ensuring that both Manuela and audience will remember the ring later when matching jewelry shows up in the recovered pirate's plunder. (The latter discovery directly recalls the earlier shot of paired hands,

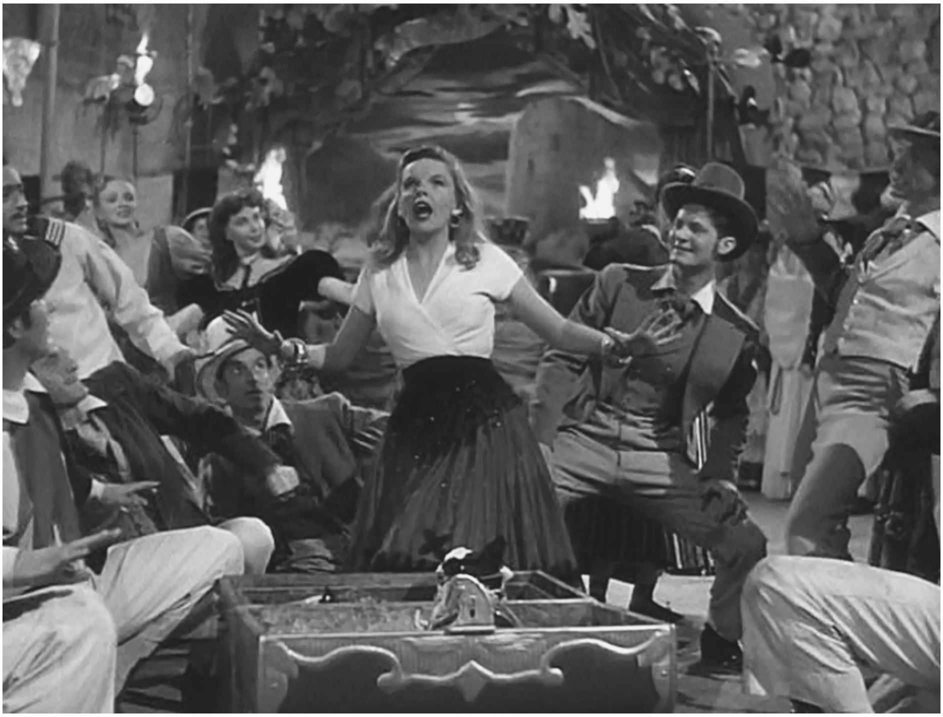

**FIGURE 18.4** Dynamic framing during "Mack the Black" in *The Pirate*.

this time with her other hand holding the matching bracelet) (▶ Video example 18.22; ▶ Image examples 18.82, 18.83). The second sequence, though not strictly speaking a "scene-melt," has a similar effect, which serves to underscore the crucial first encounter between Manuela and Serafin. She stands still in a busy plaza, sensing the sea, and then heads off toward it. As she leaves the frame, Serafin is revealed standing behind her; having been obscured by the wide-brimmed hat that frames her rapturous face, he is now revealed in his own moment of sensory captivation (▶ Video example 18.23). This key moment not only presages their romantic coupling but also indicates that, for this film, Kelly will get the same loving treatment from Minnelli's framing that Garland does. Indeed, he has already been featured in this way throughout his number "Niña" heard just before, and will be again in the extended "Pirate Ballet," both of which celebrate Kelly as a love object seen from a feminine (or gay) perspective.

## AND . . . CURTAIN

This capacity to bestow favor makes Minnelli's camp framing a double-edged scimitar, and speaks to the negative potential of the kind of presentational endorsement Minnelli provided Garland: his cinematic frames, however lovingly gilded, all too easily became a kind of cage. By any measure, Garland's performance in *The Pirate* is as ferociously brilliant as Kelly's, riding the crest of the film's sublimely extravagant camp in full-blown triumph. Yet it did not come easy for her, and it is tempting to see her emotional difficulties during its filming as something more than an outgrowth of her marital difficulties, or the onset of her paranoiac mental illness, or a failure of her drug management. Whereas Kelly's Serafin plays out his campy exaggerations within an assumed role and as an extension of his character's narcissism, Garland's Manuela achieves this level of camp management only at the end. Throughout the main span of the film, her camped persona is torn from her character's inner psyche, through hypnotism, its exaggerations born—in the film—of an artificially prolonged childhood in which her destiny is dictated by an overbearing aunt and an obviously closeted uncle. But it's not the trauma of her having to live out this close approximation of her actual family dynamic within the film's plot that is at issue here, but rather the film's reinscription of her patriarchal rescue. If we see her path to filmic adulthood shepherded by sympathetic male figures such as Minnelli, we may also want to notice that the latter's framing provides a way to continue managing her screen persona through adulthood. In this light, Kelly's role in the film seems, in parallel, to suggest against all probability that *he* (in alliance with Minnelli—an alliance that reportedly provoked Garland's jealousy during filming) is somehow teaching *Garland* to channel her real-life angst into theatricality. Clearly, however, she had long since mastered the art of doing just that, and craved a different sort of cinematic space, free of any male-mentor-imposed frame. Perhaps cued by the clownish ending of *The Pirate*, the story for her next film—*Easter Parade*, with Minnelli dropped from the project, and with Astaire substituting for an injured Kelly as her would-be Svengali who sees the error of his ways—is built around just such a liberation. While this was surely not a coincidence, it was in the end nevertheless a missed opportunity, since it did not lead to the happy real-life ending we all would have liked for the divine Judy.

## NOTES

1. I read a very preliminary version of this chapter, "The Auteur as Ghost Star: Minnelli's Framing of Judy Garland as Camp Management," at "Song, Stage and Screen X: 'The Star System in Theatre and Film,'" London, June 24–26, 2015. I thank especially Dan Sallitt, Mitchell Morris, Zelda Knapp, Arianne Johnson Quinn, and Stephen Pysnik for their consultation and advice.
2. For a different perspective on Rooney's impact on Garland's acting, especially early on, see Dominic Symonds's "'Make Like You're Singing It': Performing Musical Texture in Judy Garland's Early Films" (this volume).
3. Earl J. Hess and Pratibha A. Dabholkar, *The Cinematic Voyage of "The Pirate": Kelly, Garland, and Minnelli at Work* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2014), have called this claim into question due to the film's high-profile contributions from many others, especially Gene Kelly: "*The Pirate* was anything but an example of the auteur in action; it was a highly collaborative project, not only for Minnelli and Kelly but stretching from

Ludwig Fulda to the most obscure technician on the sound stage of M-G-M" (xv). It is, to be sure, a common misunderstanding of the *auteur* theory to assume it posits a single "author" in the same sense as a book might, thereby slighting the contributions of its other collaborators. Hess and Dabholkar later acknowledge that "Minnelli has been a prime candidate for film scholars who search for an example of the auteur in film musicals," but later conclude (after a discussion of the "Pirate Ballet") that "*The Pirate* does not illustrate the auteur in filmmaking" (123; see also 148).

4. The *auteur* theory is usually traced to French film theorist Alexandre Astruc's coinage of "la camera-stylo" ("camera-pen") in "Du Stylo à la caméra et de la caméra au stylo" ("From Pen to Camera and from Camera to Pen," *L'Écran française*, March 1948). The aesthetic importance of the film director was subsequently argued by André Bazin, François Truffaut, and others in *Cahiers du cinéma* (1951–), largely as a critique of the film industry, whose studios routinely usurped control of the final product from its director. The theory's seminal advocate in English was Andrew Sarris; see especially his "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" (reprinted often, for example in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 7th ed., ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen [New York: Oxford University Press, 2009], 451–454, and Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929–1968* [New York: Dutton, 1968]).
5. Published online as part of his blog *Thanks for the Use of the Hall*, April 2009, http://sallitt.blogspot.com/2009/04/trying-to-make-act-of-directing.html, accessed December 26, 2019.
6. Matthew Tinkcom, "'Working Like a Homosexual': Camp Visual Codes and the Labor of Gay Subjects in the MGM Freed Unit," *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 24–42; repr., *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*, ed. Steven Cohan (London: Routledge, 2002), 115–128.
7. What I will here refer to as simply "frames" are usually termed by filmmakers and within film studies as "frames within the frame," since framing generally applies in these contexts to the entire visual image.
8. Richard Dyer, "Judy Garland and Camp," in *Heavenly Bodies* (New York: St. Martin's Press and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), 178–186; repr., *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*, ed. Steven Cohan (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 107–113, at 107.
9. I discuss this sequence at greater length in *Making Light: Haydn, Musical Camp, and the Long Shadow of German Idealism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 197–203,
10. I discuss the minstrel sequences in both *Babes in Arms* (1939) and *Babes on Broadway* in *Making Light*, 158–161.
11. The ability of frames to control elements in Minnelli's films now associated with camp was sometimes noted as such by early reviewers. Thus, Cecelia Ager in her *P. M. Daily* review of *The Pirate* writes that the film "keeps its splendors within bounds, relates them to one another, and stays confidently within its own frame" (quoted in Hess and Dabholkar, *The Cinematic Voyage of "The Pirate,"* 137).
12. Even for those who know the play and can understand Garland's French, this episode will seem bewildering beyond its vague ambiance of idealistic fervor and the use of *La Marseillaise* in the background. The "excerpt" she performs is an amalgam of various elements drawn from Act II and the penultimate Act V, stitched together so as to change the dramatic focus from the Eaglet's Hamlet-like incapacity to act decisively, to suggest instead an empowering idealism more suitable for the film's political moment. Its tone of melodrama, almost musical in its delivery, is both part of its camp dimension and,

perhaps, further evidence for the musical basis for her acting that Dominic Symonds traces in "'Make Like You're Singing It.'" This tremulous quality is a prominent feature of Garland's vocal delivery in all of the films considered here (if toned down somewhat in *The Clock*), and permeates her performance in *The Pirate*.

13. http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=9&sid=9cc20878-5e3c-4404-91c6-8ff56ea18f07%40sdc-v-sessmgr03, accessed December 7, 2019.
14. Regarding these various understandings of Minnelli's use of framing in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, see especially Gerald Kaufman's *Meet Me in St. Louis* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), and chapter 3 of James Naremore's *The Films of Vincente Minnelli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Scott Higgins's far-reaching article "Color at the Center: Minnelli's Technicolor Style in 'Meet Me in St. Louis,'" *Style* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1998), "Style in Cinema": 449–470, positions Minnelli's use of frames in the film as ancillary to its innovative use of Technicolor. Thus, "Minnelli and the Freed unit innovated color design by integrating pictorial effects into the film as a whole" (455), suggesting that, by extending a pictorial approach beyond its use in musical numbers, Minnelli was concerned first of all with extending the play of color. While it is probably not useful to argue precedence, since framing and color in this context go hand in hand, I am particularly interested here in tracing Minnelli's use of frames as such. It is my hope that my discussion will be seen as a complement to Higgins's, which is particularly useful for the richness of its technical clarifications, especially regarding how Minnelli managed depth shots within a Technicolor process that could not yet accommodate deep focus (see his discussion of "You and I," 459–467).

    I have written about *Meet Me in St. Louis* four times before, with different emphases, and I occasionally draw on my earlier work in what follows here; see my *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 94–102; "The Filmed Musical," coauthored with Mitchell Morris, in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 136–151, repr. in *Media and Performance in the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 27–53, at 43–44; "Getting Off the Trolley: Musicals *contra* Cinematic Reality," in *From Stage to Screen: Musical Films in Europe and United States (1927–1961)*, ed. Massimiliano Sala, *Speculum Musicae* 18 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 157–172, at 162–164 and 168; and "Saving Mr. [Blank]: Rescuing the Father through Song in Children's and Family Musicals," in *Children, Childhood, and Musical Theater*, ed. Donelle Ruwe and James Leve (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 59–79, at 59–60.
15. The original series consisted of eight stories, to which Benson added four more to make an even dozen (covering a full year, month by month), publishing the lot as *Meet Me in St. Louis* (New York: Random House, 1942). Although the book predated the film by two years, it took its name from the anticipated film, already in development.
16. As Naremore describes this shot, "At the lower right of the screen, [Esther] leans over [Rose's] shoulder to harmonize, and at the upper left we see an art nouveau piece representing the head and shoulders of a pair of androgynous lovers, with the male figure standing behind the woman and bending over to kiss her neck. The sculpture adds a note of eroticism to an already sexy scene . . . but it also functions in much the same way as the tintype illustrations that introduce each major episode, showing art in the process of imitating art" (Naremore, *The Films of Vincente Minnelli*, 80; see also Casper 99). In a continuity lapse, the sculpture is no longer present during "You and I," although still present

earlier that evening; presumably, it would have been too imposing a presence in the foreground for the song's carefully staged framings, discussed below.

17. Naremore, *The Films of Vincente Minnelli*, 80–81.
18. *A Hundred or More Hidden Things: The Life and Films of Vincente Minnelli* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2010), 97.
19. Minnelli was the third director to work on the film, using almost none of the footage from his predecessors Jack Conway and Fred Zinnemann, and reworking many elements of the script. For a succinct and insightful discussion of the film's development, see Griffin, *A Hundred or More Hidden Things*, chap. 10; see also Vincente Minnelli, *I Remember It Well* (London: Angus & Robertson, 1974), 145–150.
20. This device may be understood to flow, in this case, from Minnelli's plan "to develop the city of New York as a third major character" (*I Remember It Well*, 146); he explained further, in an interview, that what he wanted "was to tell the story of two people who couldn't be alone . . . there was no possibility of privacy for those two people" (quoted in Griffin, *A Hundred or More Hidden Things*, 95).
21. Minnelli wanted the city's sounds incorporated into the scoring for this scene, but composer George Bassman resisted that idea, resulting in what Minnelli admits "was a jarring effect when George's music changed over to the sound effects . . . [although] the scene was lovely otherwise" (*I Remember It Well*, 148).
22. The Penn Station interiors were shot on a sound stage in Culver City; indeed, only a few of the film's exteriors were shot on site. According to Minnelli, the expense of building this particular set "was probably as instrumental in reviving the [twice-halted] project as anything" (*I Remember It Well*, 146).
23. Sally Hessler, played by Lucille Bremer and voiced by Trudy Erwin, was a character invented for the film, the daughter of a (fictional) friend and collaborator for whom Kern supposedly intended "Who."
24. "Look for the Silver Lining," introduced in the 1920 Ziegfeld show *Sally*, became Marilyn Miller's signature song. "Who" was introduced in *Sunny*, a hit 1925 musical about a circus performer that proved to be the pinnacle of her Broadway success. For his part, Minnelli singles out "Sunny," not "Silver Lining" or "Who," as the number from *Clouds* that he was proudest of (*I Remember It Well*, 165).
25. Thus, from Griffin's account of the sequence: "The critics were all in accord that this sublime 'dramatic pantomime' was the highlight of Freed's *Follies*" (*A Hundred or More Hidden Things*, 85).
26. See Griffin, *A Hundred or More Hidden Things*, 88.
27. See Griffin, 96n; Griffin connects this apparent *homage* with Sondheim's abandoned attempt to make a musical version of *The Clock*, which he admired.
28. See Minnelli, *I Remember It Well*, 164.
29. Minnelli, *I Remember It Well*, 164.
30. *The Pirate*, by S(amuel) N(athaniel) Behrman (adapted from Ludwig Fulda's 1912 play *Der Seeräuber*), was staged by The Theatre Guild with Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt, closing just after *Oklahoma!* opened in 1943. Hess and Dabholkar's *Cinematic Voyage* provides a particularly robust account of the property's adaptations, as a prelude to detailing its full production history. Regarding the centrality of camp to *The Pirate*, see my "The Musical Faces of Pirate Camp in Hollywood (Part I)," *Music and the Moving* Image 7, no. 2 (Summer 2014]: 3–33, at 10–23, and *Making Light*, 189–203; although these two discussions overlap considerably, the former includes a more extensive discussion of what I term

"pirate camp" in Hollywood films, whereas the latter connects the framing in *The Pirate* to the "Ghost Theater" sequence of *Babes on Broadway*, which together frame the Minnelli-Garland collaborations. Regarding the visual dimension of the film's camp, see Matthew Tinkcom's " 'Working Like a Homosexual.' " Regarding Garland's and Kelly's contributions to the film's camp dimension, see Richard Dyer's "Judy Garland and Camp" and Steven Cohan's *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2005), chap. 3 and 6. Regarding the musical camp in *The Pirate*, particularly that of its scoring, see Stephen Pyznik's "Camp Identities: Conrad Salinger and the Aesthetics of MGM Musicals" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2014), chap. 2, which is the basis for his "Musical Camp: Conrad Salinger and the Performance of Gayness in *The Pirate*," in *Music and Camp*, ed. Christopher Moore and Philip Purvis (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 31–48.

31. As William J. Mann argues in *Behind the Screen: How Gays and Lesbians Shaped Hollywood, 1910–1969* (New York: Viking, 2001), 270–271, the guiding spirit behind the prevalence of gay men in the Freed unit at MGM was not Arthur Freed himself, but Roger Edens: "Freed himself wasn't gay, but neither was he the true creative heart of the unit. The real maestro was Roger Edens—arranger, songwriter, and eventually associate producer. Edens was genial, cultured and brilliant—and a gay man who brought in other brilliant gay men as collaborators; hence, 'Freed's Fairies.' "
32. See, e.g., Griffin, *A Hundred or More Hidden Things*, 120–121; see Hess and Dabholkar, *The Cinematic Voyage of "The Pirate,"* 91–92, for a more skeptical accounting of the rumor and its persistence.
33. Minnelli, *I Remember It Well*, 187–188; see also Hess and Dabholkar, *The Cinematic Voyage of "The Pirate,"* 89–90.
34. Regarding the symbolic importance of the mirrors in *The Pirate*, see Hess and Dabholkar's discussion of D. N. Rodowick's "Vision, Desire, and the Film-Text," *Camera Obscura* 6 (Fall 1980): 55–89, in *The Cinematic Voyage of "The Pirate,"* 159–160.
35. The opening scene was apparently a late addition to the film, replacing a version of the title song sung by Garland; see Hess and Dabholkar, *The Cinematic Voyage of "The Pirate,"* 131–133.

## CHAPTER 19

# ESTHER WILLIAMS'S LATIN LOVERS

### STEVEN COHAN

Early in *Bathing Beauty* (George Sidney, MGM, 1944), Esther Williams's first musical at MGM, Red Skelton's character wants to serenade his fiancée, played by Williams. She is about to arrive for her daily swim and Skelton, a songwriter, has composed a song for her. However, although he can sing, and indeed has the lead in a big number later in the film, rather than perform "Magic Is the Moonlight" himself, Skelton has asked Columbian baritone Carlos Ramirez to sing it for him in Spanish. "When you sing, put your heart and soul into it," Skelton says. "Don't let her get away from you." When Ramirez replies that when he sings, they never get away, his friend modifies his request: "On second thought, maybe you'd better put *my* heart and soul into it." Ramirez then performs Skelton's song in Spanish, that is, in the original lyrics to a 1929 Spanish song, "Te quiero dijiste," which *Bathing Beauty* popularized in an English version. Backed by Xavier Cugat's orchestra, Ramirez pursues Williams around the pool as he serenades her with Skelton's composition, the Spanish lyrics of which she may or may not understand. After Ramirez finishes, Williams drops her cape, steps out of her heels, dives off the board into the pool, and swims languorously to a reprise of the music.

The substitution of Ramirez for Skelton interests me as a foreshadowing of how Esther Williams's cinematic body could blur certain ideological boundaries of the era through her association with Latinness and its visible displacements onscreen. To be sure, whatever disturbances to established binaries such as masculine and feminine or North American and South American that Williams represented onscreen probably happened unintentionally as MGM, in comparison with Twentieth Century–Fox (which had introduced Carmen Miranda to American film audiences in 1940), somewhat belatedly cashed in on the Good Neighbor Policy and the craze for Latin music. *Bathing Beauty* is one of the studio's first musicals to do so, featuring both the Big Band sound of Harry James and the Latin rhythms of Xavier Cugat. Furthermore, MGM carefully crafted a star persona for Williams that used her athletic and muscular body to connote health, purity, cleanliness, and a femininity that, at least on the surface, did not challenge masculinity or borrow its active attributes. As the quintessential "All-American girl," as Sheilah Graham called her in *Photoplay*, Williams starred opposite All-American boy Van Johnson in five musicals and hunky baritone Howard Keel in three.[1] Although she made two more films with Skelton—*Neptune's Daughter* (Edward Buzzell, MGM, 1949) and *Texas Carnival* (Charles Walters, MGM, 1951)—these two MGM stars were not coupled again onscreen, for she was paired romantically opposite Ricardo Montalbán in *Neptune* and Keel in *Texas* while Skelton led the comic subplot opposite Betty Garrett in *Neptune* and Ann Miller in *Texas*.

As central to Williams's star persona, though, was her frequent association with Latinness. Cugat appeared in four of her musicals, she starred opposite Montalbán in three, and Fernando Lamas, whom she eventually married several years after leaving MGM, appeared in *Dangerous When Wet* (Charles Walters, MGM, 1953), one of her final efforts at that studio. Subsequently, Lamas starred in her TV special *Esther Williams at Cyprus Gardens* (Alan Handley and Roy Montgomery, NBC, 1960). Toward the end of this essay I shall discuss Williams's and Montalbán's pairing with other MGM stars, but for the most part I want to concentrate on their three musicals: *Fiesta* (Richard Thorpe, MGM, 1947), *On an Island with You* (Richard Thorpe, MGM, 1948), and *Neptune's Daughter*. These three films, made shortly after the war ended and as the postwar readjustment of conventional and more rigid gender roles began, offer a revealing glimpse not only of how this studio progressively whitened Montalbán's Latinness but also how his onscreen ethnicity opened up ways of appreciating what made Williams's star image, so focused on her athletic body, a more provocative portrayal of femininity in the 1940s than one remembers or that most scholarship on the musical acknowledges. For as I argue, her repeated association with Latinness exposes the instability of her whiteness as the hegemonic "All-American girl."

## Just "An Old-Fashioned Girl"?

Esther Williams was one of the top-grossing stars of the late 1940s and early 1950s, polling as high as eighth on Quigley Publishing's top ten lists in 1949 and 1950; but she was also an anomaly, an unusual lead in musicals since her special talent was neither singing nor dancing but swimming. Furthermore, during her tenure at MGM she made only two pictures for the Arthur Freed Unit, identified with the studio's most artful and innovative musicals, mainly working instead for producers Joe Pasternak and Jack Cummings. Williams's musicals rarely integrate numbers with the narrative, whether through a fluid visual and editing style that melds the two elements or through the genre's use of song and dance to express joyful emotions spontaneously. Rather, her musicals tend to follow an aggregated aesthetic, whereby performances by specialty acts like Cugat and James occur in a nightclub or other theatrical setting, as happens in *Bathing Beauty*. When numbers do happen spontaneously as direct expressions of a character's feeling, they were handled by costars like Keel or Garrett.

From the beginning of Williams's film career, moreover, articles in the fan magazines emphasized her domesticity and normality, despite her fame as a champion swimmer and new MGM star. For instance, in 1947 Graham stressed how Williams is "the 'family-est' girl I think I ever met in my life."[2] Indeed, this writer introduces her subject, featured on *Photoplay*'s cover for the month, by debunking the supposed glamour of movie stardom:

> This is Esther Williams, the All-American Girl—at home. Usually you see Esther all dressed up—or all undressed up, on a lavish studio set, or at a glittering party. But after spending a day with Esther in her own home, you understand for the first time why she is a prime favorite with movie audiences all over the world. The wholesomeness that you see on the screen is not acting. It's as real as a sunny day in California. Or—a better metaphor—it's as real as Esther Williams.[3]

Despite Graham's normalizing of Williams as an ordinary and "real" woman seeking domestic containment—the gist of the interview is to convey the star's three wishes to find her guy, marry him, and have children—images of her in a two-piece bathing suit taken during a photo shoot on the beach nonetheless illustrate the article.

This particular view of Williams attempts to reconcile what made her special, namely her physique, swimming expertise, naturalistic screen presence, and business acumen, with what made her a normative figure of identification for *Photoplay*'s female viewers, and it recurs in article after article about her, belying the spectacular attributes on display in her musicals. In 1946 that same magazine did a pictorial biography, noting Williams's first husband ("They both tried hard, but marriage was not meant for them, so they separated") while romanticizing her second union with Ben Gage ("Love came swiftly" and they married right away).[4] As Williams (allegedly) states in another 1947 piece from *Photoplay*, in an article that discusses the "remembered darkness" of her stillborn child six months earlier, "I hope to stay in pictures for quite a while, but like most wives I see Ben's career as my real future."[5] When she became pregnant again in 1949, *Photoplay* recounted how Esther sought counsel from her mother due to anxiety that her film career would prevent her from having as close a relation with her child as she herself had with her parent, who reassures Esther that she will also be a wonderful mother because of her career, since it will force her to arrange special, exciting times to be together with her child.[6]

Likewise, a 1951 article in *Modern Screen* on Williams, now a parent, explained that "it may come as a big surprise to learn that she chose to move her family into an early American farmhouse" because "[a]ctually, Esther is an old-fashioned girl"—all the while noting her business interests and investments, including being "under contract to Cole of California for whom she designs and promotes swim suits."[7] By the 1950s, her success as a businesswoman was well known, in part because of her promotion of Cole, in part because the fan magazines recorded her various investments and business affiliations. As a 1953 article in *Modern Screen* observed, her drive "will never allow her to sit at home in the midst of her brood and grow sleepy and plump in a sedentary life" and, what is more, she "has no intention of winding up, as so many screen luminaries do, without a peso in her pocket."[8]

That last-cited article further notes that Williams "understands her own career quite well" and even shares in the banter about her surprising success, given that she was neither a great actress nor a skillful musical performer. For as Fanny Brice famously quipped about Williams's talents as a major film star, "Wet, she's a star; dry, she ain't." Going along with that type of wisecrack, Williams herself had "recently remarked that for her, life was one damp thing after another."[9] One cannot discount the importance of Williams's swimming in films or her close identification with the sport, since it was the reason for her stardom. As the *Modern Screen* article pointed out, fans expected her to swim in her films just as they expected Fred Astaire to dance and Bing Crosby to sing. "They expect her to be 'Esther Williams.' "[10] But who *was* "Esther Williams" in the water?

Williams's films use her swimming *musically* so that they function as *her* numbers, solos when she swims alone and production numbers when she headlines an aqua ballet, as in *Bathing Beauty* and *This Time for Keeps* (Richard Thorpe, MGM, 1947). In *Million Dollar Mermaid* (Mervyn LeRoy, MGM, 1952) and *Easy to Love* (Charles Walters, MGM, 1953) the aqua ballets became even more breathtakingly spectacular in the daring routines that Busby Berkeley designed for Williams. Whether swimming solo, synchronized with an ensemble, or diving in waterskis from a helicopter, Williams's movement in the water expresses a utopian pleasure, the kind of spontaneity and joy that Gene Kelly repeatedly called "dancing happy" when referring to his tap solos. A smiling Esther Williams is visibly *happy* when swimming, seemingly relieved momentarily of the contrivances of a musical's plot. Moreover, although rumors persisted that she used a double in some dangerous moments orchestrated by Berkeley, it also seemed pretty obvious that Williams did her own swimming and almost all her own stunts, which authenticated her star personality so that onscreen she appeared to be "as real as Esther Williams." For instance, in a pictorial article that included a photo of Williams with her husband but was centered on the same large image of her on waterskis that dominated the ad for the film, *Screenland* noted, "Esther uses no double for her thrilling water ski scenes in 'Easy to Love,' filmed at the famous Cyprus Gardens in Florida."[11]

Williams even sometimes dances in the water with her costars, as she does with Montalbán in *On an Island with You* and *Neptune's Daughter*. In her autobiography, Williams complained that, with the exception of Lamas, a champion swimmer in his native Argentina, her male costars could not swim well and she had to hold them up in the water or walk with them on a concealed ramp.[12] But I think she was mainly thinking of someone like Peter Lawford in *On an Island with You* and forgot how well Montalbán in particular could keep up with her in their swimming waltzes.

Her tall frame, physical strength, eloquent movement, powerful lungs, and daredevil stunts—these attributes, unconventional for most female stars of this period, underwrote the utopian sensibility of Esther Williams's swimming. And her swimming, the reason for her stardom, raises the central ideological problematic that she embodies. Taken together, the two most sustained if opposite analyses of her star text illustrate the dualism at the heart of Williams's appeal as a movie star in the decade after the war.

On one hand, as Catherine Williamson comments, "while the display of Williams' healthy body was central to the success of her films, that body itself was a site of conflict and contradiction. Onscreen and in related publicity materials, Esther Williams is both 'naturally' beautiful and a product of the studio glamour factory; strong as a man and yet quintessentially feminine; an organic, sexual body that is nonetheless wholesome, pure, and germ-free."[13] Williamson thus attributes to Williams's success "[t]he brilliant way she merged 'femininity' and athleticism into an aesthetically pleasing yet politically innocuous form."[14]

Kirstin Pullen, on the other hand, finds greater ambivalence in that "politically innocuous" femininity. "Because her body was coded as beautiful as well as strong," Pullen states, "wholesome as well as sexy, her feminist address may have escaped censure by critics, fans, and the industry."[15] For "in order to be believable as a romantic heroine," this critic continues, "Williams had to be paired with a specific type of athletic, muscular leading man. Her body demanded that its power be matched with an (almost) equally powerful partner." In this way, Williams's characters modeled a partnership between equals rather than, as in Skelton's B-plots in Williams's films after *Bathing Beauty*, the milquetoast man and aggressive woman or, as in other Hollywood products, "the more typical coupling of a vulnerable woman and protective man."[16] Yet by the same token, Pullen also notes, "in an Esther Williams vehicle men are supporting players. . . . her powerful physical presence and status as a single protagonist undercut the romantic finale."[17] As important, given how swimming appears so satisfying to her, "Williams's 'natural' body is active and controlled by its owner as well as a visual spectacle; the pleasure is both her own and her audience's."[18]

Williams's athletic body, in short, was problematic for her era yet central to what made her a major star: the one-piece swimsuit may have accented her conventional beauty, showing off her womanly figure and bosom, but it also displayed her muscular arms, broad shoulders, and strong legs (Figure 19.1). Likewise, the swimming numbers in her films showed off her feminine grace and eloquence in the water but they also made evident her risk-taking and daring stunt work, which the fan magazines noted even while focusing on her domesticity and motherhood.

It is important to remember, then, that Williams, the "Queen of Technicolor Musicals," as an ad for *Neptune's Daughter* trumpeted, was a *very* big star during the ten-year period from 1945 to 1955.[19] This was a time when American culture dramatically renegotiated what counted as hegemonic masculinity and femininity after the disturbances to gender and sexuality effected by World War II, which I and others have discussed at length elsewhere.[20] The more liberal sexual behavior due to the greater access to homosexual and heterosexual encounters in the military was tamped down after the war as domestic and Cold War ideologies worked together to cement a rigid hetero/homosexual dualism. Put very simply, for men the gender instability of wartime—arising from how induction centers classified homosexuality solely on the basis of demeanor, thus admitting virile gay men without question and banning effeminate men regardless of their sexual orientation—was countered by a dominant ideology after the war that saw gendered demeanor and sexual practices as conjoined indices of one's hetero- or homosexuality.

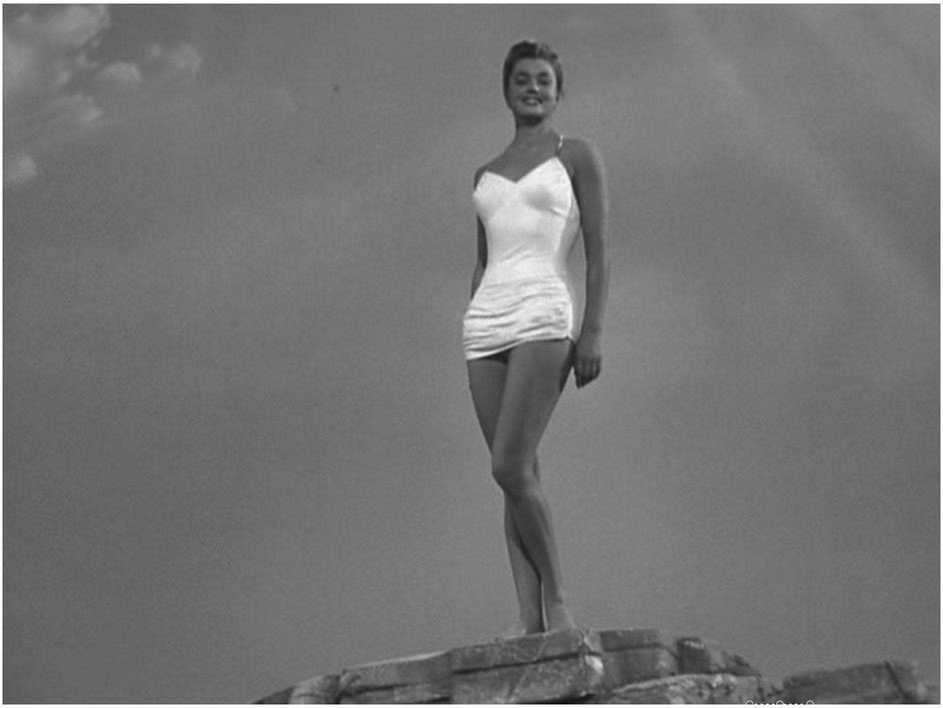

**FIGURE 19.1** Eve (Esther Williams) shows off one of her bathing suit designs to potential buyers before diving in the pool. The film promoted Williams as the "Queen of Technicolor Musicals." *Neptune's Daughter* (MGM, 1949).

For women, many of whom had joined the workforce or military, achieving greater economic and sexual independence, femininity was rigidified by that same ideology that insisted upon its extreme opposition to masculinity in terms of sexuality, the appearance and adornment of bodies, and a woman's primary role as wife, mother, and housekeeper. This is the context in which Williamson argues that Esther Williams safely channeled her athletic body into an innocuous femininity; but at the same time, it is also the context in which Pullen argues that the star challenged such a femininity, projecting a body that—beautiful, strong, and powerful—was always in her control.

## Impersonating Latinness: *Fiesta*

During this same period, the Good Neighbor Policy had effectively concluded as an official government program once the Cold War began with the Allies' occupation of Germany after the conclusion of World War II, but the policy's influence on motion pictures remained throughout the 1940s. The Good Neighbor Policy was established by Franklin D. Roosevelt in early 1933 and its impact was almost immediately registered onscreen in *Flying Down to Rio* (Thornton Freeland, RKO, 1933).[21] To counter Nazi influence in Latin America, the policy was renewed in 1940—the year that Fox introduced Carmen Miranda to audiences in *Down Argentine Way* (Irving Cummings, Twentieth Century–Fox, 1940)—with the creation of the Office of Inter-American Americans. As a major component of the OIAA, John Hay Whitney's Motion Picture Division vetted Hollywood scripts in conjunction with the Production Code Administration. Joining the PCA in 1941, Addison Durland censored Latin images to "mirror the imagined national identities of Latin American elite," which, as Brian O'Neil describes, was "light skinned, modern, and civilized"[22]—in other words, someone like Ricardo Montalbán.

In its promotion of him for *Fiesta* as the studio's "handsome" new "star discovery whose torrid love makes the screen curl up at the edges," MGM declared that Montalbán is: "Equally adept at dancing and at the strings of a guitar . . . equally audacious in the bull ring and in the moonlight." He is "manliness" personified, bookended by "the beauty of Esther Williams" on one hand and "the magic of Mexico" and "the magic of Technicolor on the other." "Welcome, Good Neighbor!" MGM's monthly column in *Modern Screen* exclaimed.[23] Similarly, an article in that same magazine the following year warned viewers, "He doesn't look like the typical American conception of a Mexican, but Americans have some funny conceptions. His charm has an effervescent quality about it: he is a bundle of nerves, but they are under control. And he is a genuinely intelligent man."[24]

Hollywood's motive for making "Good Neighbor" films was intended to develop the Latin American marketplace when Europe and Asia became embattled. Furthermore, Dale Adams notes that Hollywood acquiesced to Addison's elite Latin imagery because the elites in Latin America controlled the theaters and distribution channels there.[25] But a compromise with existing stereotypes of hot-tempered and sexual, colorful yet darker, Latinx people was still evident. Charles Ramírez Berg identifies six long-standing filmic stereotypes of Latinx characters: the *bandido*, the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the Latin lover, and the dark lady. The latter two types—the lover, who is "sensuous but dangerous" yet "clearly non-WASP" and had been famously incarnated by Rudolph Valentino, and the lady, who is "virginal, inscrutable, aristocratic—and erotically appealing because of these characteristics"—lent themselves most readily to the light-skinned elite ideal and thus were most often personified by stars like Gilbert Roland and Cesar Romero or Dolores del Río and Rita Hayworth, while the four other types reinforced the subordination of Latins as dark others, whether dangerous (the *bandido*, the harlot) or rendered unthreatening (the male buffoon, the female clown).[26]

Thus, as O'Neil points out, "the Latin America imagined by Hollywood became more prosperous and modern than ever before, but its inhabitants . . . still functioned as subordinate entertainers."[27] This was obviously the case when it came to the signature elements of most Latin entertainers, as in the examples of Xavier Cugat and his singer Lena Romay or Carmen Miranda. To a lesser degree, as MGM's language in the studio's introduction of Montalbán's exotic "manliness" and "effervescent" yet "controlled" nerviness in *Modern Screen* indicates, it applied as well to Ricardo Montalbán, who both was and was more than a "typical conception" of a Latin man, more aristocratic in his bearing yet with an "inscrutable" if heated sexuality—in short, as much a "dark male" as

"Latin lover." Early in his tenure at MGM during the late 1940s, the time I am focusing on now, besides his three films with Esther Williams, he did a specialty Latin dance—a torrid ménage-a-trois flamenco with Cyd Charisse and Ann Miller—in the 1948 musical *The Kissing Bandit* (Laslo Benedeck, 1948, MGM), which is the highpoint of that picture.

That Williams's body connoted excess in the gender realm—feminine yet with masculine skills, power, and agency while appearing to safely contain that excess through her "old-fashioned" normality—may have been why she could be Latinized so easily in *Fiesta*, in which she plays Maria, the twin sister of Montalbán's Mario. The twins are so close that Maria's fiancé gets exasperated as her brother is always present in their conversation even when he is physically elsewhere: "You think in carbon paper—everything comes out in duplicate," he complains. Nonetheless, despite their closeness, Maria speaks with a decided American twang while Mario's speech does not conceal Montalbán's Mexican accent. When Williams questioned the illogic of their being twins because of their different accents, she was told that it made sense because the Anglo Mary Astor was playing their mother and the Hispanic Fortunio Bonanova their father, and that growing up her character only spoke with the mother and Montalbán's with the father. "After a while," Williams observes in her autobiography, "you just kind of have to accept the idea that not everything in Hollywood is going to make sense."[28]

Apparently, it also made perfect sense according to MGM to feature Esther Williams in *Fiesta* not only as Mexican and Montalbán's twin sibling, but also as a woman who wants to be a bullfighter and is darn good at it. Torn between his love of music and desire to compose and the bullfighting tradition instilled in him by his father, a famous matador, Mario runs away from the arena when he learns that his father has lied to him about an opportunity to work with a famous conductor in Mexico City. With the family's honor tarnished by what the public thinks was Mario's cowardice in the bullring, Maria, who has quietly mastered all the bullfighting skills her father has taught her brother over the years, decides to take Mario's place, redeem his reputation, and cause him to return to see who is working the red cape in his name.

"Bravo for a Beautiful Daredevil!" an advertisement for *Fiesta* in *Modern Screen* exclaims. "By day, disguised as a man, she found the fiercest beasts in Mexico's bull ring, but at night, in the arms of her sweetheart, she was all woman!"[29] A poster for the film is more daring insofar as it shows one color image of Williams in matador costume superimposed over a grayscale one of her in more conventional feminine attire. This composition implies several things: that Williams's character is a divided self, torn between her feminine and masculine sides; that her figure similarly resonates an American-Latin dualism; and that her masculine Latin personality dominates. This double image is in perfect accord with the logic of *Fiesta*. Maria successfully impersonates her brother, with whom she has strongly identified, so in the arena she is dressed and convincing as a young man in the full matador costume. Extrafilmically, a stuntman stood in for Williams in the long shots of Maria in the ring with the bull. (If you look closely, apparently you can see that in some of those shots, when the body double turns to face the camera momentarily, "Maria" has a visible crotch.) Topping that slippage, Williams reports that the Mexican tailor assigned to dress her in an authentic matador uniform became so distressed by the need for darts that he wanted her to cut off her breasts or he would not continue.[30] At that point, Hollywood took over and finished the costume.

The gender slippage indicated by the advertisement and poster discloses the additional ethnic slippage that appears not to trouble *Fiesta* at all. Montalbán's clipped Mexican accent, in contrast with Bonanova's thick one, connotes "elite" breeding and gentility, a semblance of Montalbán's being whitened as a Latin "elite," and this ethnic coloration is amplified by his being cast as Esther Williams's twin. That may be why the studio was not bothered by their different speech patterns. Furthermore, while Williams and Montalbán play twins, and Maria repeatedly identifies with Mario as if he were her second self, she is the athlete, he the musician. Montalbán has all the musical numbers, several Latin dances with Cyd Charisse, who plays Conchita, a Mexican. A two-page photo article in *Screenland* entitled "Mexican Magic" and also meant to introduce Montalbán as "a new man to watch," shows him on one page with Charisse rehearsing a difficult dance and on another with Williams in a bullfighting pose.[31] By contrast, Williams's character Maria, older by fifteen minutes or so, is more assertive; she openly defies her father, arranges for a famous conductor to hear Mario's composition, and then takes matters into her own hands by posing as her brother in the bullring. Only at the last minute, Williams reports, did MGM remember that the ranch setting and bullring did not provide much opportunity for her to swim, so a scene of her in the water was hastily added so she could appear in a swimsuit.[32]

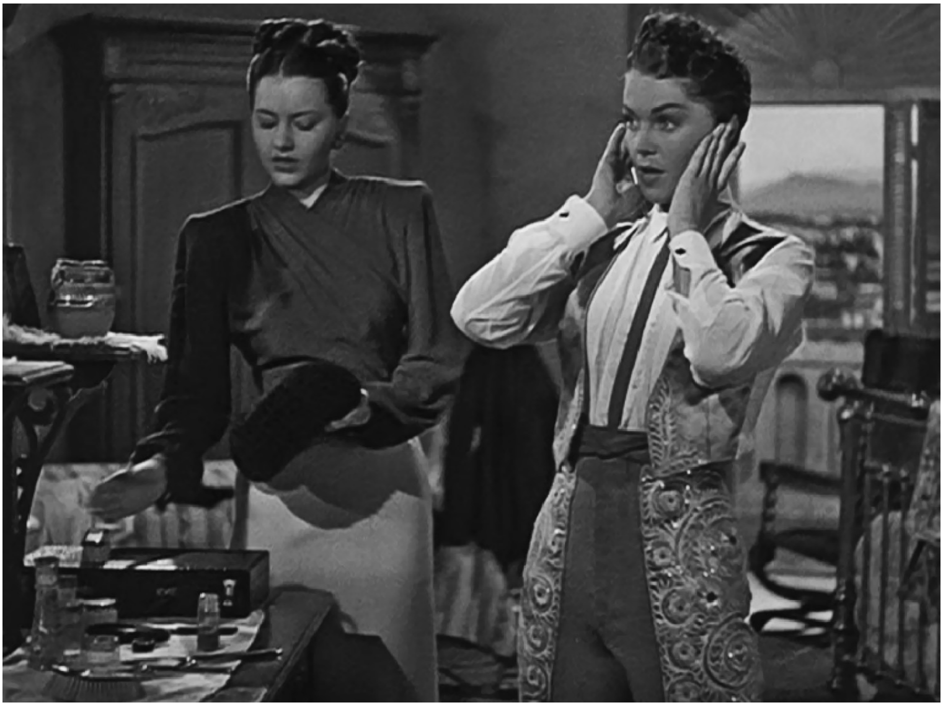

**FIGURE 19.2** Maria (Esther Williams) prepares to pass as her twin brother in the bull ring with the help of Conchita (Cyd Charisse). *Fiesta* (MGM, 1947).

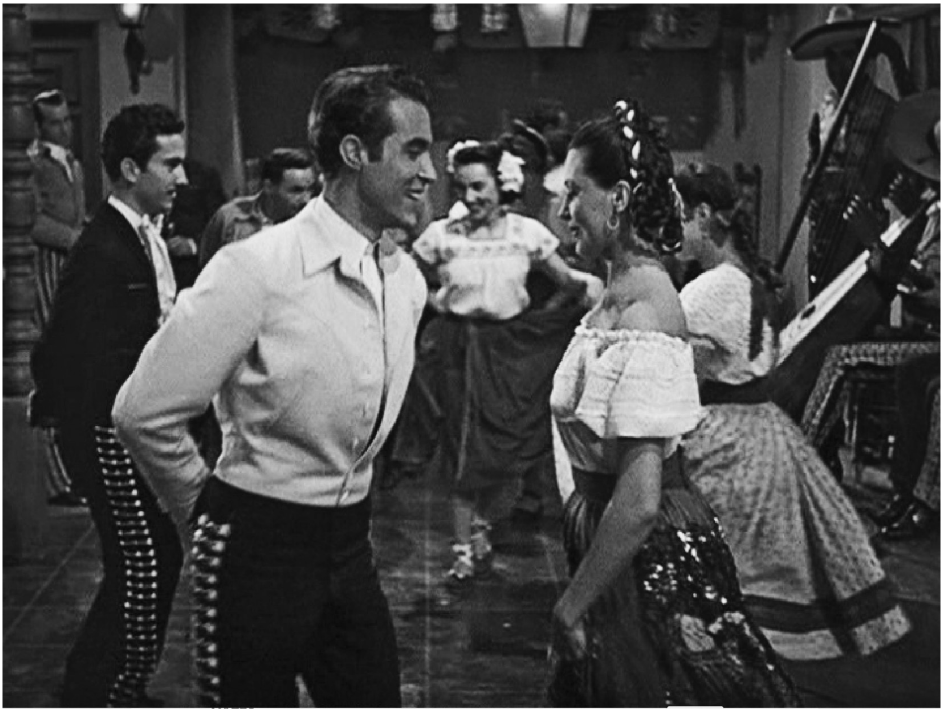

**FIGURE 19.3** Mario (Ricardo Montalban) and Conchita (Cyd Charisse) dance in *Fiesta* (MGM, 1947).

If Montalbán's Mario projects a "soft" version of masculinity, in contradistinction to the emergent gender ideology of the postwar era, then Williams's Maria projects a "hard" or at least defiant version of femininity. The narrative of *Fiesta* depends on our acceptance of her as a Mexican, which is also to say that *Fiesta* uses ethnicity to mark what is otherwise already somewhat unstable in 1947 about Williams's feminine swimming persona. As that ad in *Modern Screen* also states, "Gorgeous Esther Williams is an eyeful . . . in a dazzling evening gown! . . . in matador costume! . . . in a bathing suit!" But with the film denying Williams much opportunity to swim, bullfighting serves as the substitute athletic activity, made all the more apparent in its displacement of her femininity when she impersonates her twin brother. In short, with Montalbán's Mario affiliated with music and dancing, and Williams's Maria with bullfighting, Williams's and Montalbán's Latin characters cross stereotypical masculine and feminine poles.

## ACCENTED LATINNESS: *ON AN ISLAND WITH YOU*

Another intersectional crossing of gender and ethnicity happens in the second musical starring Williams and Montalbán. In *On an Island with You*, they play affianced movie stars, Rosalind Reynolds and Ricardo Montez, working on location on a Pacific island. The film-within-the-film has Rick portraying a US Navy officer while Roz and Yvonne Torro, played by Cyd Charisse, portray native islanders competing for his attention. *On an Island with You* opens with a beach scene being shot, although it is played initially as happening in the diegesis. Williams dives from a cliff and leads a group of synchronized swimmers through the water. Then we see Montalbán. At first Bill Lee, born in Johnson, Nebraska, supplies a voice for Montalbán as his character sings the title song with Williams peering at him from the water and Charisse gazing at him from behind palm trees. Williams and Charisse wear face and body makeup that darkens their skin—in other words, café-au-lait makeup or brownface—and their darkened appearance helps to make Montalbán, dressed in naval whites in contrast with the women's sarongs, look whiter by comparison (Figure 19.4). At least until he opens his mouth to speak. Peter Lawford plays a bona fide navy lieutenant, Larry Kingslee, hired as technical advisor, and as he watches the scene being filmed, he comments, "An American naval lieutenant with that accent?"[33]

Narratively, *On an Island with You* works to address the problem of the American/Latin movie star couple as signaled by Larry's comment. To be sure, within the diegesis non-white ethnicity is marked only by the film-within-the-film; otherwise, characters take Roz and Rick's relationship at face value. Yet a critique of their union is implied by the narrative's work in separating them as a romantic couple. Larry, whom Roz had met

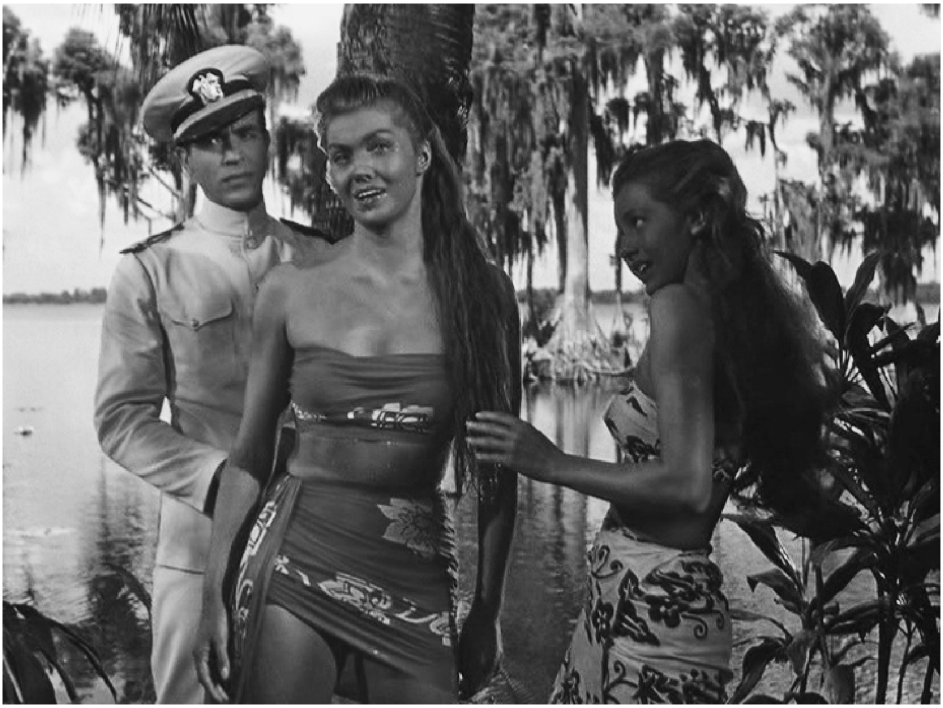

**FIGURE 19.4** Rick (Ricardo Montalban) serenades Roz (Esther Williams) and Yvonne (Cyd Charisse) in the shoot of a film-within-a-film that opens *On an Island with You* (MGM, 1948).

earlier on a USO tour although she now cannot remember him, pursues her, kidnaps her for a day to remind her of their past encounter on a nearby island, and not surprisingly she ultimately falls in love with him. Furthermore, as in *Fiesta,* Montalbán and Charisse again have the hot dance numbers, though their torrid duet for the film-within-the-film (untitled but named "The Dark Duet" on the DVD), is more balletic than in *Fiesta*, with many lifts and choreography like that of the French Apache, yet with musical accompaniment by Xavier Cugat and his orchestra. Through their dancing in this duet, Rick and Yvonne realize their feelings for each other, as the director comments that they never kissed at the finish like that before. And it turns out Yvonne has a Latina grandmother, which clinches the deal for Rick. In sum, like goes with like to move the film toward its closure. The *abuela*'s black mantilla, while a conventional costume in film for an aged and widowed Spanish guardian figure, signals the Hispanic origin of Latin ethnicity, too, hinting at the classed and white European signification of the couple's ethnicity—and of Montalbán's.

In counterpoint to the conservatism of the fragile romantic narrative, though, are Williams's swimming numbers. In her languorous duet with Montalbán in the hotel's pool she shares an intimacy with her swimming partner that she does not display with Lawford. In that water duet the two swimmers' parallel movement visualizes the equality of their bodies gliding through the water's surface. Though Montalbán twirls Williams, he never seems to lead; if anything, given her prowess in the water it seems as though she is controlling the choreography as opposed to being controlled by it.

In contrast, the two times Lawford is in the water with Williams he sinks. Due to unexpected circumstances, Larry and Roz have to spend the night on the island. He has one of those 1940s problem dreams in which Roz's fidelity to Rick causes Larry to doubt the strength of his passion. But even just looking at his thin physique in comparison to Williams's muscular one indicates their asymmetry as a couple, the narrative's ending notwithstanding. Williams radiates strength and confidence whereas Lawford seems out of his element. In the dream Larry watches Roz and Rick kiss and swim together, the music recalling their earlier duet in the hotel pool. As a spectator, Larry insists that she is his girl but Roz queries his love. She then calls him to join her in the water, as if that were the test, and they swim together awkwardly until Larry is pulled under by Rick; the two men then fight in the murky depth of the lagoon. Larry triumphs but Roz declares she is still going to marry Rick, and the dream ends. The film's closure repeats the swimming motif of that dream. Roz and Larry continue to bicker and, when he shouts she has to forget she is an actress and remember she is a woman, Roz pushes him in the hotel pool, where he sinks to the bottom. After a few moments she dives in to lead him to the surface for their big clinch, after which they sink back down. All of this is to say that while Williams and Montalbán are a matched pair in the water, Lawford has trouble just staying afloat. Here in the closure and earlier in the dream, it *does* look like Williams is holding him up.

*On an Island with You* is not as provocative as *Fiesta* in terms of how it uses gender and ethnicity as tropes for designating the unconventional attributes of Esther Williams's swimming persona, for it does so more indirectly. It is somewhat of a piece with *Fiesta* in terms of how Montalbán functions as a figure of displacement due to his Latinness. I began this essay by noticing how the Colombian Carlos Ramirez incongruously substitutes for Red Skelton in *Bathing Beauty*, which implies how Latinness signifies for that film as the displacement and hence a momentary absence of Skelton's whiteness as an American. *Bathing Beauty* initially attaches this association to Williams when she swims to "Magic Is the Moonlight," but the association gets pushed to the background when the story moves everyone from California to New Jersey. In *Fiesta*, Williams's athleticism is associated with her character's defiance of her father, identification with her brother's masculinity, and expertise as a matador, which allows her to pass as a man. Narratively, Williams displaces Montalbán from the Mexican bullring when she substitutes for him, and her ethnic impersonation as an actress helps to disguise the implications of her character's gender impersonation as the evidence of Maria's assertive and athletic femininity.

Montalbán then segued from playing Williams's brother in *Fiesta* to her rejected lover in *On an Island with You*, resulting in another type of ethnic substitution when Peter Lawford displaces him in Williams's affections. This film works narratively to resolve what it marks as an initial ethnic imbalance of the two couples—Lawford pursues Williams, who is engaged to Montalbán, who is loved from afar by Charisse. The ethnic intermixing that troubles this film narratively, if not musically either in the dancing or swimming duets, is evident in the dark makeup on the two women in the opening and comparative whiteness of Montalbán's appearance next to them. But whereas he just plays a naval officer in the film-within-the-film, Lawford's character is said to be the genuine article.

Still, in the water, which always signifies more strongly than story does in an Esther Williams film, often working at cross purposes with the conventional romance plot, Montalbán is a more charismatic presence than Lawford. Montalbán's movement matches Williams's as they swim, and their water dancing puts them forward as the disruptive interethnic couple because it makes their pairing attractive—as attractive as when they costar as lovers in the film-within-the-film. There Williams plays the ethnic other who hides out in Montalbán's plane when he has to depart the island. But it turns out that Lawford, stunt driving the plane for Montalbán in another substitution, is the one who spirits her away. Lawford's function, then, is to tame—or rather "whiten"—Williams's "Otherness" as a woman by displacing Montalbán in the narrative, though without much success since their coupling is less convincing, if more conventional. And she does push him in the pool at the end in response to his ordering her to be more of a woman, and then *she* jumps in the water to save *him*.

## PERFORMING LATINNESS: *NEPTUNE'S DAUGHTER*

In *Neptune's Daughter*, the final musical pairing of Williams and Montalbán, this time as the bona fide romantic couple, her character, Eve Barrett, is a competitive swimmer turned businesswoman much like Williams was in real life. Partnering with Joe Backett (Keenan Wynn), Eve runs a swimming suit company for which she designs the rough sketches of suits, and she understands every aspect of how the factory works too. She wears glasses and tailored suits and claims not to have the time for nor any interest in men (Figure 19.5). As she explains to Joe, "I'm strictly a career girl. The only interest I have in men is if they whistle at our bathing suits." Though Williams herself was married and discovered she was pregnant just as filming began, her character seems transparently to represent the aspect of her public persona that emphasized her business acumen and swimming career. Shortly before starting the film, Williams had signed with the Cole swimming suit company to be their spokeswoman, and Cole designed the suits worn by her and her swimming team in *Neptune's Daughter*.

Despite her initial profession of independence and disinterest, Eve falls in love with Montalbán's character, José O'Rourke, the captain of the South American polo team on tour in the United States. At the film's end, she quits her business to marry him and plans to depart with him to South America. Thus, although *Neptune's Daughter* portrays Eve as an independent, financially successful woman, who is athletic and savvy, takes potential buyers on an informed tour of the swimming suit factory, and with Joe meets potential business associates because she knows more than he about some things, the film cannot close without tying her to a man to reiterate the Hollywood maxim that a woman cannot have both love and a career.

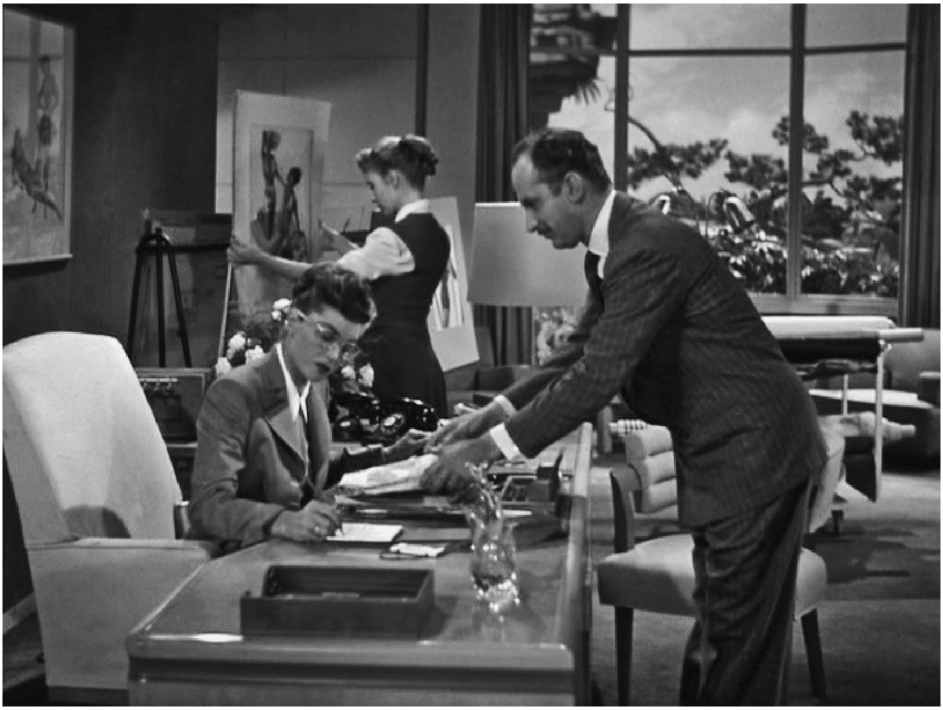

**FIGURE 19.5** Eve (Esther Williams) is all business in *Neptune's Daughter* (MGM, 1949).

Unlike his other films with Williams, *Neptune's Daughter* casts Montalbán as the more stereotypical Latin lover. His José is South American, albeit with an Irish surname that gets scant attention but suggests a white Irish father, and as a Latin Romeo he is the sexy romantic lead in contrast with Red Skelton's Jack Spratt, a bumbling masseur in the tack room on the Polo Grounds. The plot's complications arise when Eve's sister Betty (Betty Garrett) mistakes Jack for José; both sexually inexperienced, though he is shy and she aggressive, Jack and Betty fall in love, and Jack perpetuates the ruse in order not to lose her. Trying to save her sister from falling into the hands of a well-known international womanizer, Eve finds the real José, who promises not to see Betty if Eve goes out with him. This is the circumstance that motivates the Academy Award–winning song, "Baby, It's Cold Outside," which comprises sung dialogue with one singer urging acquiescence to staying for another drink or cigarette, and the other resisting. When Eve goes to José's apartment thinking Betty is there, the two sing the first version of this number. Then a cut to Jack's apartment reverses the genders with Betty urging and he resisting.

After that number an abrupt blackout takes us to Casa Cugat where Xavier Cugat's orchestra performs "Jungle Rhumba," a production number that contrasts with Cugat's previous one in the nightclub, "I Love Those Men," sung by Betty Garrett with clowning by Skelton. Unlike that first number, which is sung in English and more North Americanized in its sound, after opening with moaning sounds and then a Spanish verse "Jungle Rhumba" is primarily orchestral with a pounding beat; the male musicians and female dancers look like indigenous Latin Americans in terms of their skin color as well as how they are clothed; and the production design evokes primitive Latin iconography in the set, costuming, and the drums as well the dancing. Even a monkey appears at one point! This number can be considered MGM's "tasteful" version of the Latin numbers in Fox musicals; but more important, the jungle motifs of this number, performed in a nightclub that caters to white patrons, helps to whiten Montalbán by comparison, especially when he shows up and is surrounded by former romantic conquests, all white women.

Yet with Jack mistaken for José the otherwise conservative screenplay of *Neptune's Daughter* also dips its feet into troublesome waters. The film reiterates racist stereotypes of Latinness—in addition to "Jungle Rhumba," Mel Blanc's character Pancho (as listed in the end credits, or "Julio," as the characters call him in the film itself), speaks in the "theeek" accent he would use for Speedy Gonzales in "Looney Tunes" cartoons for Warner Bros. and is characterized as slow-witted. Similarly, Jack and Betty do not know Spanish but toss around well-known song phrases in French as well as Spanish when pretending to speak the language. Yet the ease with which Jack comically inhabits his "José" persona nonetheless denaturalizes Latinness, suggesting the degree to which a perception of Latin Otherness is a cultural construct. The same inference results from the jungle motifs of "Jungle Rhumba," which makes the primitivism of South America performative rather than natural. Similarly, when he arrives at Betty's for their first date, Jack wears the (for him) loose-fitting gaucho costume he had seen in a photo of José. He brings a record of a man speaking Spanish and mouths the words. When speaking English as "José" he stretches vowel sounds, even when singing "Baby, It's Cold Outside."

Cugat rattles off a speech to him in Spanish, which Jack as "José" assents to but does not understand and so gets roped into playing instruments in that musical number with Betty, "I Love Those Men." Indeed, José himself jokes about the instability of Spanish in being different from English (and thus from whiteness) when, after getting his massage from Jack, he says, "*Hasta la vista*! In your language, that means '*adios*, *amigo*'!" For that matter, doesn't "José" turn out to be a sexier, darker, more romantic version of "Joe," Eve's business partner and persistent suitor?

Betty and apparently Cugat are not the only ones who cannot tell the difference between the red-headed Anglo-looking Jack and the dark-haired, accented José. The corrupt manager of Casa Cugat, Lukie Luzette, wants his henchman to kidnap José so he can bet against the South American polo team and win a bundle. The goon he first sends also mistakes Jack for José. In attempting to elude his captor, Jack disguises himself as one of Eve's swimsuit models. That Jack rather successfully if only momentarily integrates himself into the rehearsal of synchronized swimming, that Eve does not notice his presence, and that, catching sight of him, Betty simply wonders if her José has a sister, disturbs the otherwise stable ground of gender, too. When Luzette discovers the error and has the real José taken, Jack escapes and, though his ineptitude results in much slapstick business, fills in for the real polo player in another substitution and wins the tournament.

In short, in order to preserve Williams and Montalbán as the conventional romantic couple in *Neptune's Daughter*, the burden of displacing his visible and audible ethnicity as a Latin man falls upon the comic shoulders of Red Skelton, reversing the ethnic displacement in *Bathing Beauty* with which I began. Jack's pretense of being Latin draws comedy from the ease with which ethnic Otherness can be construed as a masquerade; yet that Betty and others cannot see through his imposture, while yielding much of that comedy, makes one wonder about the essential status of José's ethnicity as well. Certainly, his reputation for womanizing may be the result of his masquerading as a Latin lover, which undercuts the stereotype somewhat. "Spanish is the language of love," José tells Jack when he goes to the masseur in the opening for help with his bruised shoulder. "Women can't resist it." When he and Eve arrive at the polo grounds, ostensibly to check on one of his horses, José has arranged for Pancho (or Julio?) and others to play the romantic "My Heart Beats Faster," which he sings (in English, not Spanish) to Eve, who reluctantly gets drawn into dancing with him. Subsequently, at the Café Cugat the song turns out to be one José has previously sung to the half-dozen former lovers who happen to show up, one of the several times Eve gets angry at him and leaves in a huff.

Similarly, Jack's ease in disguising himself as a female swimmer, who nonetheless stands a head taller than the rest, makes one wonder about the conventional femininity Eve inhabits at the end when she gives up her business to marry José. As *Neptune's Daughter* opens and Joe supplies the exposition about Eve's success in competitive swimming, he notes, "There comes a time in every woman's life when she has to turn professional"—the joke dependent on the implication of a woman joining the world's oldest profession, which Joe immediately qualifies to negate any inference of that on a viewer's part. In the conclusion Joe may as well have remarked, "There comes a time in every woman's life when she has to turn personal," since the ending implies a criticism of Eve's earlier indifference to men and romance as well as of her business acumen and success. Nonetheless, the finale of *Neptune's Daughter* is an Esther Williams aqua ballet in which José surprises Eve in the pool and, much as Williams and Montalbán did in *On an Island with You*, the couple waltz together in the water, reminding viewers of their ease when swimming together and of Williams's professional success as an athlete and a movie star.

## Change Partners: *Two Weeks with Love, Latin Lovers*, and *Dangerous When Wet*

Following *Neptune's Daughter*, Montalbán acted in several non-musicals; he had the lead in two crime dramas, *Border Incident* (Anthony Mann, MGM, 1949) and *Mystery Street* (John Sturges, MGM, 1950), and received third billing after Van Johnson and John Hodiak in MGM's prestige picture for 1949, *Battleground* (William A. Wellman), and after June Allyson and Dick Powell in *Right Cross* (John Sturges, MGM, 1950). He also starred in two musicals opposite other female stars at MGM, and their difference from his three with Williams highlights the more provocative treatment of gender and ethnicity in the swimming star's films with him.

*Two Weeks with Love* (Roy Rowland, MGM, 1950) casts Montalbán opposite Jane Powell, who plays a seventeen-year-old girl, Patti Robinson, smitten with his character, Cuban Demi Armendez, when they meet at a Catskills resort. In comparison with his films with Williams, there is no narrative reason why Patti's love interest needs to be Cuban except to account for the performer's accent, and he is mainly in this film as male eye candy. When Demi enters the resort dining room in his first scene, all the women seated there turn and stare at him; flustered, Patti embarrasses herself by running into a waiter who spills a tray with bowls of tapioca pudding on Demi; subsequently, Patti's friend, Valerie (Phyllis Kirk), who is older, sexually more experienced, and an actress, competes with her for Demi's attentions; and Patti has two fantasies about him which, while respecting conventions of the time and the PCA, the film glosses as a teen's somewhat absurd erotic musings.

The plot of *Two Weeks with Love* arises from Patti's conflict with her parents, who try to keep her a child, believing she has yet no interest in the opposite sex, so they will not let her wear a corset like other "respectable" young women. Patti's corset-less state is the big "secret" keeping her from Demi even though he is obviously interested in her, and the second fantasy, a long operetta-styled dream sequence, has Patti strolling around the resort, singing and wearing a corset, stockings, long gloves, and wide-brimmed hat with thick ribbons. Although Montalbán is only nine years older than Powell, on screen the age difference seems much greater; indeed, in that dream sequence the corseted actress no longer looks or acts seventeen because the costume and her movement signify a more mature and experienced young woman. Visually and narratively, however, Powell's Patti for the most part has to act young, immature, and insecure, in contrast to the maturity and sexual confidence that Montalbán's Demi radiates; the two stars thus never display the chemistry the actor has onscreen with Williams, whose maturity is always commensurate with his. While the film was profitable for MGM, today *Two Weeks with Love* is known for the breakout performance of Debbie Reynolds, playing Patti's younger sister, Melba (whose obvious interest in men should have given the parents something to ponder), due to her number with Carleton Carpenter, "Abba Dabba Honeymoon," which became a hit single.

*Latin Lovers* (Mervyn LeRoy, MGM, 1953), which stars Montalbán opposite Lana Turner, likewise introduces him as an object of the female gaze. Nora Taylor (Turner), the richest woman in the world and a highly capable and assertive businesswoman, freezes when it comes to romantic relationships because of a childhood experience: a boy apparently took a shine to her but really wanted all her marbles. Now a wealthy woman with a fabulous wardrobe and assets of $37 million, Nora expects to marry fellow business tycoon and somewhat wealthier Paul Chevron (John Lund). When she discloses to her analyst, upon whom she is greatly dependent for advice on matters of the heart, her reluctance to be as assertive in love as she is in business, the doctor encourages her to let her feelings reign but also to let Paul determine her decision when he proposes, which Nora expects him to do that evening. Meanwhile, Paul's analyst convinces him not to be aggressive with Nora, telling him instead to ask rather than order her to accept his offer of marriage. As a result, since Nora wants Paul to tell her what to do and not to ask her to think about his proposal and get back to him with an answer, the experts' advice turns out to thwart her immediate acceptance and to cause her to doubt his passion when the couple is out at a nightclub later that evening.

After a Brazilian production number at this club, Nora dances with one of the performers. He tells her, "things happen to a man in the air of Brazil," for in that atmosphere the man sees what he wants, and he takes what he wants. Nora thus believes that "the air of Brazil" will make Paul a more passionate lover, so the next day she follows him to Brazil, where he has gone with his polo team; although she immediately feels emboldened by the Brazilian air, Paul, who has injured his leg playing polo, tells Nora that the atmosphere simply helps him get a good night's sleep. The couple is still at a standstill when she meets Roberto Santos (Montalbán), a horse breeder—and, apparently, a stud in his own right in comparison with the emasculated Paul.

Having more to do in this musical than in *Two Weeks with Love*, Montalbán's character, the eponymous Latin lover, personifies a dominating yet attractive male sexuality for Nora of the sort bespoken by her analyst. Accompanying Paul to the Santos ranch to look at a horse he hopes to buy, Nora complains that all horses look alike to her; but when she sees Roberto riding the horse she stares at the man and agrees he looks very fine indeed. Paul appreciates one steed and Nora appreciates another: obviously, not all men look alike to her. After Roberto leads the animal into the barn, Nora follows him there to continue staring; suddenly he takes her into his arms and kisses her passionately (much as she had hoped Paul would do after she left her analyst's office). She walks away in an erotic daze while Roberto continues to brush the horse. Subsequently, it is worth noting, Nora tells the nebbish from the American embassy, who is teaching her Portuguese and is smitten with her, that a woman likes being looked at, thus enabling the screenplay to give lip service to a restoration of the "proper" gender balance in terms of who stares and who is stared at.

On the phone with her analyst, Nora says, "I saw a man. He kissed me. I liked it a lot. Do I make the next move?" The kiss leads to a romantic relationship with Roberto that gets complicated by her worry that he is interested in her money. When she asks him if he would love her if she were penniless, he says he cannot answer because he fell in love with her as she is, with all her history, and if she were poor she would not be the woman he fell in love with and he would not know her. However, it turns out that Paul himself has had an eye on her money because he wants to pool their fortunes, so Nora returns to Roberto. They quarrel at their engagement party when she informs him of her plans to give away her fortune to be sure of his intention; after they reconcile yet again, she reveals that she has still decided to give all her money away—but to him.

The Brazilian setting of *Latin Lovers* means to signify a sexual aura that North Americans like Paul and Nora lack. Roberto, by comparison, personifies "the air of Brazil," a phrase Nora repeats several times, and he enables her to breathe it. "Brazil" in the film thus signifies tempestuous sexual feelings and excitement, indicated by Turner's dancing a samba with Montalbán and by his singing (albeit he is dubbed, possibly by Carlos Ramirez according to the IMDB) all of the film's tunes after the nightclub number. His songs celebrate "passionate loving," as indicated by their titles: "I Had to Kiss You," "Come to My Arms," "Carlotta, You Gotta Be Mine," and "A Little More of Your Amour."

Furthermore, as Bianca Freire-Medeiros notes, "the Rio presented in *Latin Lovers* is an allegorical shorthand for all cities in Latin America. Along with the customary pseudo-samba, Montalbán sings a mixture of a tango and a rumba, while some of the characters keep referring to his farm as a 'hacienda.' While signifying a farm in Spanish, the word is not the same in Portuguese."[34] The farm setting is thus stereotypically "Latin," with a peasant whose job is to sit by the barn and play the guitar, *señoritas* (led by Rita Moreno as Christina) who jealously inspect Nora after she returns there that evening and Roberto sings to her, a smattering of Hispanic-sounding dialogue, and the Latin dancing that takes place there. Dressed in dark colors, her head covered by a lace scarf, Nora's figure contrasts with the more colorfully garbed locals dancing at Roberto's birthday party. When he first dances the samba with Nora she moves stiffly, one arm high over her head and the other at her waist, looking down at her feet as she dances, and she steps on his foot. After making fun of her posture, Roberto demonstrates how to samba the correct way with Christina: bodies close together, cheeks touching at times, hips swaying and swinging. "See? Loose," he says. "A very loose dance. Tight inside. Loose outside." Nora tells him to ask the band to play the tune again, and she does it properly (though Turner is not as "loose" as Moreno was). With Rio being so generically

Latin, the Mexican Montalbán can "believably" play the Brazilian Roberto while the Anglo Louis Calhoun plays Roberto's Brazilian grandfather.

What might *Latin Lovers* have been like if crafted as a vehicle for Montalbán and Williams? Turner's screen persona is consistent in *Latin Lovers* with her other films once she became a big star. Very blonde and white, kittenish when being assertive, adorned in one glamorous outfit after another, Nora defers to her partner's strength, commanding presence, and ultimately his reasoning that he cannot answer if he would love her if she were not rich. The samba dance sequence establishes this sexual hierarchy when Roberto has to teach her to be "loose outside." By contrast, in her films Williams's naturalistic presence as a performer and her characters' typical "no-nonsense" or initially resistant attitude toward her romantic partner work with her expertise and pleasure in the water to make her a far more commanding female figure, a woman who is "loose outside" insofar as she is perfectly comfortable with her body. Her athletic persona thus usually results in screen partnerships with men who are her physical equal, as Pullen noted, which is why Montalbán stands out as a more suitable lover for Williams than Lawford in *On an Island with You.* At the very least, if Williams had starred in *Latin Lovers* the musical would most likely have turned out to be more like *Neptune's Daughter* in its plotting of the Nora-Roberto romance but without Red Skelton to disturb the ethnic stereotyping of Brazil.

MGM's other contracted Latin star in the 1950s was Fernando Lamas, who starred in four musicals for the studio: *Rich, Young and Pretty* (Norman Taurog, MGM, 1951), *The Merry Widow* (Curtis Bernhardt, MGM, 1952) opposite his then-lover Turner, *Dangerous When Wet* (Charles Walters, MGM, 1953) opposite Williams with whom he only had a professional relationship at this point in their lives, and *Rose Marie* (Mervyn LeRoy, MGM, 1954).[35] Unlike Montalbán, Lamas was not dubbed in his numbers, and he pretty much carries the entire score of *The Merry Widow*. After that film's success, Lamas was initially cast in *Latin Lovers* but Turner reportedly refused to work with him after their affair ended, so Montalbán replaced him.[36]

Whereas off screen Montalbán was characterized as a solid citizen, serious and talented performer, and happily married man, Lamas was the quintessential Latin lover in fan magazine accounts, yet he was never cast as a Latin American in his MGM musicals. If Montalbán's Mexican origin could signify any Latin nationality, the Argentinean Lamas was treated even more generically as a European "other"; in this way on screen he was whitened despite his accented speech. In *Rich, Young and Pretty* and *Dangerous When Wet* he plays French, in *Rose Marie* French Canadian, and in *The Merry Widow* his character, the rakish Count Danilo, hails from the fictional Marshovia, located somewhere between Austria, which wants to annex the tiny kingdom, and France, where Danilo is well known by every woman in Paris and where much of the film's action occurs. Reunited with Williams for her 1960 television special at Cyprus Gardens (they were to marry nine years later), Lamas was cast as, of all things, a Persian (and hence not an Arab) prince from Samal ("Lamas" spelled backward). In this special's thin plot the prince's harem and entourage have taken over the part of the Gardens that Williams, playing a version of herself, had planned to use for a swimming number.

As he became a star at MGM, gossip depicted Lamas as irresistible to women—his two public conquests at this time were Turner, who was so smitten she allegedly gave him the close-ups in *Merry Widow*, and Arlene Dahl, who became his wife in 1954—and exploitative of them. Sheilah Graham's article on him in *Photoplay*, which asked if he was a hero or heel to women, repeated the gossip that he used his affairs with both actresses to promote his career, if not at the studio then in the press. He tells Graham that Dahl would "give up everything, even her career," for "the man she loves," so the writer has to wonder, somewhat reiterating the situation facing Lamas's Count Danilo, "how much would Fernando give up for the woman he loves? And is it possible for him to be one hundred per cent in love?"[37] Graham closes her piece by musing that if he had not been such a success in *Merry Widow*, Lamas might have returned to his film career in Argentina and the wife he divorced there, which might have been "the best thing" for her and Turner. And possibly for his fiancée, Dahl, too.

That shady sexual aura, while somewhat sanitized, clings to Lamas's character, the Frenchman André Lanet, in *Dangerous When Wet*. After first rescuing American Katie Higgins (Williams) when fog settles over the English coast while she is training in the water, every time they subsequently meet he disrupts her single-minded focus on her goal of swimming the English Channel from the French coast to Dover in a contest sponsored by the *Daily Mail*. Not only can he keep up with Katie in the water when they subsequently swim together in his pool but, sexually attracting her, he is a distraction from her goal of getting her family farm out of debt by winning that grueling Channel swimming race in the women's division.

An experienced yachtsman, André offers to take Katie out again so he can teach her about the currents and tides but that is far from his real intention, as he readily admits, since he spends the afternoon wooing her; at dinner that evening he gives her a gift of a bikini, which embarrasses yet intrigues her enough to try it on later in the privacy of her hotel room, as he knows she will do despite her supposed outrage; and with the start of the race uncertain due to heavy rain, she accompanies him to his estate for a picnic that lasts the entire day and, since she gets drunk, into the night when, after they go swimming to clear their heads, the race's start is resumed. However, Katie is no babe in the woods when it comes to André's seductive tactics. In a lengthy animated sequence Katie dreams she is swimming toward Dover with Tom and Jerry, and she imagines André is an octopus who attempts to seduce her with his Gallic charm and a bubbly reprise of his earlier love song, "In My Wildest Dreams" (Figure 19.6). With Tom and Jerry pulling her arms forward and André pulling her backward with four of his eight tentacles, Katie struggles to free herself from the lascivious octopus, causing her to wake from this anxiety dream.

Lamas's stardom as a Latin Lover signifies his character's personality as a seducer of women, while his character's being French effaces the possible threat of the actor's Latin ethnicity by making it a generic trait of white male Europeanness. Katie eventually

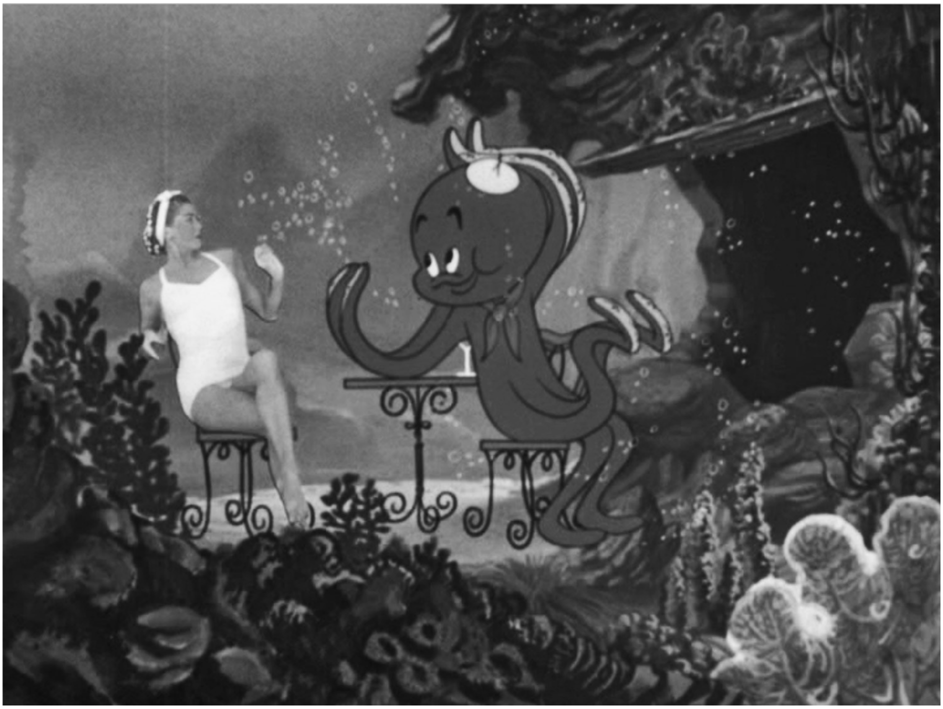

**FIGURE 19.6** Katie (Esther Williams) resists the Octopus's (Fernando Lamas) amorous interest in the animated dream sequence of *Dangerous When Wet* (1953).

tames André's threatening sexuality, too, since, in the coda after she wins the race, she marries him and, though he is wealthy from a family business that makes champagne, brings him back to Arkansas with the rest of her family. Yet this coda should not detract from appreciating what makes *Dangerous When Wet* progressive if not outright "dangerous" for the era despite Lamas and because of Williams.

## "As Real as Esther Williams"

Much like Maria in *Fiesta*, Williams's character in *Dangerous When Wet* defies conventional gender norms of the period. Katie is an athlete and champion swimmer who follows the healthy lifestyle of her agrarian Arkansas family and who is determined to swim the English Channel, which turns out to be a dangerous gambit given the very bad weather, the watery conditions, and the length of the swim, which may be twenty miles "as the crow files," but in reality is thirty or forty miles, since the swimmers have to zigzag with the currents; moreover, no one from her team can touch her as she makes her way toward Dover in the harsh sea. By the time an exhausted Katie nears the beach, she is the only woman left in the contest. André jumps in the water to pace and encourage her though she has to warn him several times not to touch her, and even if she is the only woman to reach Dover, to win the contest she has to walk ashore on her own, which she does with André's cheering her on before she collapses on the beach.

*Dangerous When Wet* differs from other Esther Williams musicals in many ways. First, Katie swims competitively as an amateur and not, as in most other of the star's films, as a professional appearing in a water show, whether on stage, in front of cameras, as part of a fashion show, or at Cyprus Gardens. Katie's empowerment in the water is due to her strength, endurance, and determination. *Dangerous When Wet* thus lacks the big water ballet one expects of her films; instead the musical centerpiece is the animated dream when Williams swims with Tom and Jerry (and the octopus). Second, initially the film self-reflexively makes a joke out of the expectation that Williams will even get in the water. In the opening sequence, the health-minded Higgins family travel to a nearby pond; one by one they remove their sweats and dive in the water to do their laps. Katie removes hers, dips a toe in the water, and sits down to read a book on dairy farming. Admonished for missing her laps the past several days, she is ordered by her parents to dive in. "Do I have to?" she asks. Well she does have to, and only then, after delaying audience expectations for a few minutes with this "wink-wink" gag that acknowledges her persona and her presence in the film as its star, does Williams get wet with underwater shots of her enjoying the water but not doing laps. Third, in this musical the star is not dubbed but sings in her own voice, further authenticating her screen presence. Williams joins in two of the film's four musical numbers, "I Got Up in Bed on the Right Side," a choral number with her family as they march to the pond in the opening, and "Ain't Nature Grand," a pass-along song for all the major characters on the night before the race. Fourth, while Lamas offscreen was known in fan magazines for his hot-blooded, hot-tempered Latinness, onscreen here he is not only made European but ultimately his character can only swim alongside Katie to cheer her on to the finish as she seems to succumb to fatigue from the very long swim; she has to do it all on her own and without a man's help. Katie is "as real as Esther Williams."

In the three musicals starring Williams and Montalbán, by comparison, the latter's Latinness is a much more slippery and shifting signifier. Although ethnicity is not as marked in the entire Williams canon of MGM musicals, due to her casting opposite Montalbán in their trio of films—*Fiesta*, *On an Island with You*, *Neptune's Daughter*, each of which configures his Latinness in relation to her femininity differently—the instability of the Latin male becomes a way of detracting from the instability of Williams's own fraught portrayal of the conventional, "old-fashioned," "girl-next-door" femininity reiterated by the fan magazines. In no small way due to the effacement of Lamas's Latinness, *Dangerous When Wet* builds its narrative of the Channel race to highlight that very instability, possibly indicating why Williams's star appeal would diminish so quickly afterward, causing MGM to drop her upon the failure of her next film, the campy *Jupiter's Darling* (George Sidney, 1955, MGM). For by then, especially with the popularity of the boyish gamine (Leslie Caron, Audrey Hepburn), the athletic Esther Williams had indeed become a bit too dangerous when wet.

# NOTES

An early and much shorter version of this chapter appeared in French as "Les *Latin Lovers* d'Esther Williams" in *Politiques du musical hollywoodien*, ed. Aurélie Ledoux and Pierre-Olivier Toulza (Nanterre: Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2020). I also wish to thank the organizers of Musicals MC$^2$: The Hollywood Film Musical in its Mediatic and Cultural Context and of the University of North Texas Post-War Faculty Colloquium for giving me opportunities to try out some ideas about Esther Williams and her Latin costars, as well as the various participants at both events for their helpful comments and questions.

## NOTES

1. Sheilah Graham, "3 Wishes Had Esther," *Photoplay* 31, no. 4 (July 1947): 56.
2. Graham, "3 Wishes Had Esther," 116.
3. Graham, "3 Wishes Had Esther," 56.
4. Lynn Perkins, "*Photoplay*'s Photolife of Esther Williams," *Photoplay* 30, no. 1 (December 1946): 60.
5. Dorothy Deere, "More than Ever . . . Esther Williams Holds Happiness in Her Hopes—despite Remembered Darkness," *Photoplay* 30, no. 4 (March 1947): 118.
6. Kate Holiday, "Mermaid-in-Waiting," *Photoplay* 36, no. 4 (September 1949): 36–37, 87.
7. Marva Peterson, "How Esther and Ben Live," *Modern Screen* 43, no. 3, (August 1951): 52. This article is a sidebar piece accompanying a longer one on what stars do with their large salaries.
8. Jane Wilkie, "Wet She Is—Dry She Ain't!" *Modern Screen* 47, no. 4 (September 1953): 60, 62.
9. Wilkie, "Wet She Is," 59.
10. Wilkie, "Wet She Is," 59.
11. "Constant Nymph," *Screenland Plus TV-Land* 58, no. 3 (January 1954): 16.
12. Esther Williams with Digby Diehl, *Million Dollar Mermaid* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 227.
13. Catherine Williamson, "Swimming Pools, Movie Stars: The Celebrity Body in the Post-War Marketplace," *Camera Obscura* 38 (May 1996): 5–6.
14. Williamson, "Swimming Pools, Movie Stars," 9.
15. Kirsten Pullen, *Like a Natural Woman*: *Spectacular Female Performance in Classic Hollywood* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 65.
16. Pullen, *Like a Natural Woman*, 78.
17. Pullen, *Like a Natural Woman*, 81.
18. Pullen, *Like a Natural Woman*, 79.
19. Advertisement for *Neptune's Daughter*, *Screenland* (July 1949), 5.
20. See, e.g., Steven Cohan, *Incongruous Entertainment: Camp, Cultural Value, and the MGM Musical* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), esp. 152–164; and Steven Cohan, "This Can't Be Legal? Queer Masculinities in the 1940s Hollywood Musical" in *Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema*, ed. Ron Gregg and Amy Villarejo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 214-41.

21. *Flying Down to Rio* not only reflected the federal government's views on international trade through its new Good Neighbor Policy, but its representation of Rio also suited the interests of the various corporations financing the film—RKO, RCA, Rockefeller Center, even Pan American Airways. See Brian Henderson, "A Musical Comedy of Empire," *Film Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (Winter 1981/1982): 2–16; and for an account of this film's setting in a Rio imagined by Hollywood, see Bianca Freire-Medeiros, "Hollywood Musicals and the Invention of Rio de Janeiro, 1933–1953," *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 53–55. Freire-Medeiros considers several other major musicals from the 1940s and early 1950s that made Rio central to their narratives, including *Latin Lovers*, discussed below.
22. Brian O'Neil, "The Demands of Authenticity: Addison Durland and Hollywood's Latin Images during World War II," in *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 361.
23. "Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *The Lion's Roar*," *Modern Screen*, August 1947, 2.
24. George Benjamin, "Dark Man in Your Future," *Modern Screen*, August 1948, 62.
25. Dale Adams, "Saludos Amigos: Hollywood and FDR's Good Neighbor Policy," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 24, no. 3 (2007): 293.
26. Charles Ramírez Berg, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, & Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 76.
27. O'Neil, "The Demands of Authenticity," 360.
28. Williams, *Million Dollar Mermaid*, 139.
29. Advertisement for *Fiesta*, *Modern Screen* (August 1947), 3.
30. Williams, *Million Dollar Mermaid*, 138.
31. "Mexican Magic," *Screenland*, September 1946, 56–57.
32. Williams, *Million Dollar Mermaid*, 140.
33. *Pagan Love Song* (Charles Walters, MGM, 1950) illustrates how darkening Williams could also work to uphold ethnic stereotypes, possibly because in this musical she stars opposite Howard Keel playing a man from Ohio who inherits his uncle's coconut plantation. *Pagan Love Song* also indicates different kinds of onscreen racism during this period when directed at Pacific Islanders and Latinx people. Williams's Mimi Bennett is half Tahitian, half American, and that she so easily moves back and forth between these two worlds on the island simply highlights the characterization of the Tahitian characters' difference as a childlike people motivated mainly by the kind of pleasures that, conceivably, would have been highly attractive to wealthy white Americans seeking an island paradise for a holiday: lots of swimming, dancing, feasts, tribal customs and celebrations—and pratfalls by a fat native woman involving an imported bathtub. Shot on location, in its depiction of Tahiti as an island paradise where work and salaries do not seem to matter for the inhabitants, *Pagan Love Song* plays on the appeal of the stage hit *South Pacific* and its mysterious Bali Ha'i, but without that show's reference to the war or its critique of American racism. To be sure, producer Arthur Freed ended up deleting several numbers from *Pagan Love Song* to achieve a running time of only 76 minutes, rather short for a year-end holiday release, which may indicate the studio's dissatisfaction with the film. It is also worth noting that in *On an Island with You*, and in contrast with *Pagan Love Song*, most of the ethnic stereotyping that I talk about is marked as "performative" and not "authentic" since it happens in the film-within-the film.
34. Freire-Medeiros, "Hollywood Musicals and the Invention of Rio de Janeiro," 60.
35. The other Latin actor who worked at MGM in several non-musicals, although his career in the United States began in the late silent era, was Gilbert Roland, who, like Lamas,

typically played the Latin Lover, though with more dangerous overtones. Berg examines how Roland resisted that stereotype through his performances, as in *The Bad and the Beautiful* (Vincente Minnelli, MGM, 1952) (*Latino Images in Film*, 97–101).

36. Sheilah Graham, “Fernando Lamas—Hero or Heel?” *Photoplay*, February 1954, 78. Imogene Collins gave what purported to be a blow-by-blow account of the fight that “really called a halt to the sizzling love affair between Lana Turner and Fernando Lamas” at a big bash thrown by Marion Davies in “The End of the Affair,” *Modern Screen*, January 1953, 36–37, 68.
37. Graham, “Fernando Lamas,” 76

# PART V

# AFTER THE STUDIO SYSTEM

## CHAPTER 20

# *XANADU* AND THE MUSICAL'S HISTORY OF FAILURE

### MARTHA SHEARER

*Xanadu* (Robert Greenwald, 1980) was a failure. It narrates a clear desire to revive the glory days of the Hollywood musical, but was wildly unsuccessful in doing so. At its London premiere, apparently the only person with anything nice to say about it was aging star of 1930s British musicals Jessie Matthews.[1] Geoff Brown in the *Financial Times* asked, "Is this really what the Hollywood musical has been reduced to—piles of cheap glitter and songs so banal that they hardly enter one ear let alone come out of the other?"[2] While there have been far greater box-office disasters, critical revulsion was such that it was one of two musicals, along with the Village People vehicle *Can't Stop the Music* (Nancy Walker, 1980), that inspired the creation of the Golden Raspberry awards.[3] While the film has since acquired something of a cult following, such that a stage adaptation opened on Broadway in 2007, its ambitions were clearly far bigger, and that cult audience remains modest. Commercially and critically, it failed on its own terms while also largely failing to find redemption on any others.

Failure has been a key subject of recent work in cultural history and theory. Scott Sandage locates the origins of the contemporary notion of failure, as "the most damning incarnation of the connection between achievement and personal identity," in the history of nineteenth-century US business: "If the market is an invisible hand, failure is how that hand disciplines and ejects the misfits of capitalism."[4] Studying failure therefore allows us to focus on those misfits. Sandage himself recounts the history of the documentation of failure, "the hidden voice of pessimism in a culture of optimism."[5] Similarly, Jack Halberstam argues that failure needs re-evaluation since although it "comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life."[6] In film and media studies, studying failure—commercially and critically failed films and media texts, failed or "dead" media technologies, or even "unproduction studies"—also enables contestation of dominant historiographical narratives and aesthetic norms, reframing film and media history, in Charles Wolfe's words, as "a set of branching pathways, some of which are blocked, others of which continue on."[7] Failed texts very often fail to comply with commonly held aesthetic standards, whether those standards are industrial, as in Lisa Dombrowski's study of the failure of *Park Row* (Samuel Fuller, 1952) to adhere to the studios' models of "quality storytelling" by forsaking "tight plotting and carefully motivated action," or theoretical, as in Katherine Groo's observation that Bordwell's Aristotelian poetics and emphasis on industry-wide aesthetic norms "cannot accommodate the nonnormative or the irregular, the unprincipled or dynamically unstable objects of history."[8] Moreover, failure tells us about the shifting and complex intersections of histories of aesthetics and histories of capitalism. Kay Dickinson, for example, argues that "the more such 'failures' are examined, the more what 'doesn't work' on the aesthetic level appears to be intimately related to the organizational and semantic systems of *work itself*."[9] Failure is a fuzzy and complicated term: some forms of failure (box office, for example) are more obvious and measurable than others, and the parameters of any of the multiple, intersecting forms of failure we might consider are highly historically and geographically specific.

At its peak, the Hollywood musical was the jewel in the crown of a system built around mitigating against failure through its Fordist mode of production and monopolistic practices. And yet the history of the musical is littered with spectacular commercial and/or critical failures: both individual films from *King of Jazz* (John Murray Anderson, 1930) to *The Pirate* (Vincente Minnelli, 1948) to *Cats* (Tom Hooper, 2019) and historical moments when the genre as a whole was perceived to be failing. Firstly, in late 1930 the industry was beset by a crisis of confidence in the value of musical sequences. Studios significantly curtailed production of musicals mid-production and cut musical sequences from films yet to be released.[10] The genre was largely abandoned until its revival with the Busby Berkeley/Warner Bros. musicals of 1933: *42nd Street* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933), *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1933), *Footlight Parade* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933). Then again in the late 1960s, a series of flop big-budget musicals produced in the wake of the enormous success of *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965) have led to the genre routinely being blamed for bringing the entire industry to the brink of collapse. Both these moments are more extreme in their rejection of the genre than can be accounted for by straightforward shifts in taste. And both saw the musical as the canary in the coal mine for Hollywood's broader experience of financial crisis: the impact of the Depression and the breakdown of the old studio system respectively.

The late 1970s and early 1980s was another moment when the musical came to be perceived as a failed endeavor: the failure of late New Hollywood auteurist labors of love like *At Long Last Love* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1975) and *New York, New York* (Martin Scorsese, 1977), cynical cash-ins on pop sensations like *Can't Stop the Music*, and more outré curiosities like *The Apple* (Menahem Golan, 1980).[11] But *Xanadu*'s historical moment is both like and unlike earlier moments of generic failure. While the genre as a whole was seen to be failing, the broader industry was not; this was the period when the New Hollywood was dying so that corporate blockbuster Hollywood could live. *Xanadu*'s production at the time of the blockbuster model's emergence, then, coincided with a new prominence granted to spectacular commercial successes and failures, including the widespread reporting of box-office statistics. Indeed, the late 1960s musicals already exemplified the capacity for spectacular individual films made under the package-unit model, which came to define the industry from the late 1950s, to fail on a large scale.[12] Jeffrey Sconce locates the late 1960s as the origin of a cinephile disillusionment with cinema: for the "jaded, bored, and otherwise dispossessed cinephile," a "continuing and even growing interest in cinematic failure—be it the doomed blockbuster, the overly precious Sundance winner, or the grindhouse travesty—might best be thought of as a cinematic death wish, a new and terminal aesthetic order."[13] While Sconce sees this as the condition of (American) cinema in general, in the early 1980s the musical acquired a particular specter of failure that would haunt the genre for decades, only partially sloughed off with the series of "successful" musicals of the twenty-first century. To write about the Hollywood musical now is still to write about a form widely understood as in some way embarrassing or at the very least not of this time.

There is something about failure that is peculiar to the musical, whereby its breaks with realism, its pervasive camp, the sense that there's something fundamental to the genre that doesn't *work*, are seized upon at moments of industrial and cultural transformation. The genre's capacity for failure has been a critical point of interest: Amy Herzog suggests that the musical moments of films "marred by failure, noise, clumsiness, rupture, and perversity" point to "a certain representational logic that may lie hidden beneath the surface in more seamless, polished works."[14] Of all the failed musicals of its time, *Xanadu* is a particularly useful—and perhaps even rich—text. It is a film that has been deployed to fit dominant narratives; the *only* way that it gets discussed is as a failure. In what follows I pay attention to the film's own interest in success, its relationship to real estate and property development narratives both on- and offscreen, its use of special effects, and its relationship to generic traditions in order to unpick the particular resonances of its failure. I argue that the nature of its failure needs to be understood in the context of a wildly uncertain period for both the film industry and the musical, principally the reassertion of studio control and the emergence of generic forms more suited to such conditions. Those contexts shape not only the success narrative *Xanadu* constructs but also the frequently jarring and baffling ways it conveys that narrative. Its textual incoherence is of interest not only for what it reveals about those contexts, but also for precisely how it renders the film resistant to capitalist dynamics, all the while embracing them on a representational level. Above all, *Xanadu* is a way into the particular attractions, and risks, that success/failure dynamics have held for the musical throughout its tumultuous history.

## OPTIMISM

The musical is preoccupied with success. The production of entertainment is a common subject, most obviously in the backstage musical subgenre. The genre regularly presents us with accounts of how success is achieved and what constitutes a successful show or film or record, and so on. Jane Feuer has influentially argued that while all musicals about the production of entertainment are necessarily self-referential, others are self-reflexive, using the backstage format "to present sustained reflections upon, and affirmations of, the musical genre itself."[15] Such films are dedicated to the propagation of the "myth of entertainment," demystifying unsuccessful performances so that the myth is restated more emphatically with the remythified successful ones. Successful performances are presented as spontaneous, emerging from the same community as their audience, and generating apparently unmanipulated responses from diegetic audiences.[16] This is not to say that demystification, as Feuer understands it, is the same thing as defining failure, but self-reflexive musicals do that too. Both *Singin' in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952) and *The Band Wagon* (Vincente Minnelli, 1953), for example, depict rescue efforts to make successes of a failed show or film and construct tight relationships between aesthetic failure and commercial failure. For those films, the markers of a failed text are technical ineptitude and artistic pretensions respectively: a lack of commitment to popular (i.e., commercially successful) entertainment and poor execution of that entertainment. This is popular cinema both explaining its own popularity and occluding its own industrial status, as Feuer puts it, "a mass art which aspires to the condition of a folk art."[17] At its peak, the musical was thoroughly dedicated to the American "culture of optimism" Sandage describes. Whether depicting successful shows and performances, generating utopian feelings, or valorizing entertainment itself, it is optimistic in explicitly capitalist terms.

As a film about the production of entertainment, *Xanadu* is very much in line with generic tradition. It opens with frustrated artist Sonny (Michael Beck) bumping into roller-skating muse Kira (Olivia Newton-John) who has arrived in the Venice neighborhood of Los Angeles via a mural of her and her sister muses that has come to life. He then encounters Danny McGuire (Gene Kelly), construction mogul and retired jazz clarinetist, who dreams of opening a club to relive his big band–era glory days. Kira's mission is to inspire Sonny and Danny to team up to purchase and renovate an abandoned auditorium, transforming it into Xanadu, a roller disco. Sonny and Kira fall in love, leading her mythological parents to grant her unprecedented approval to return to earth after her mission has been accomplished. The film explicitly presents Xanadu the club as an effort to revive 1940s culture and by extension the Hollywood musical. Like the studio-era musical, *Xanadu* is dedicated to narrating and expressing a vision of success. It does so, however, in a manner very specific to the 1980s through its dual concerns with both the successful production of entertainment and successful property development.

*Xanadu*'s particular vision of success was fundamentally shaped by a context in which property development was becoming, in Mike Davis's words, the "ascendant power" in 1980s Los Angeles.[18] That context is especially apparent in the choice of location for the auditorium that Sonny and Danny remodel into Xanadu, the Pan Pacific Auditorium, whose history serves as the dark, failed mirror of *Xanadu*'s property development narrative. The streamline moderne Pan Pacific Auditorium was built in Fairfax in 1935 to house a home appliance exposition.[19] It would go on to host car shows, concerts, ice skating, roller derbies, and presidential rallies before closing in 1972 in the face of competition from rival venues. In 1979, it was purchased from the estate of an automobile magnate using city, county, state, and flood control district funds.[20] In the years afterward it was neglected and vandalized while also being the subject of ongoing debate about its future restoration and redevelopment. After inviting proposals in 1981, in 1983 LA County selected the Somerset Group to develop and operate the auditorium.[21] Redevelopment plans, however, fell through in 1987 after the developers had failed to secure financing; investors were reportedly "frightened" by the prospect of renovating a "decrepit" structure "home to derelicts."[22] By 1988 there were new plans to "bring Pan Pacific arena back to life" in the form of a retail and entertainment center, despite strong objections from local homeowners.[23] The auditorium burned to the ground the following year. Shortly afterward, Stephen J. Sass noted in the *Los Angeles Times* that the auditorium's loss "could pale by comparison to an even more devastating tragedy looming less conspicuously: the gradual sacrifice of the vibrant Fairfax neighborhood to gentrification precipitated by large-scale commercial development."[24]

In contrast to this slow, thwarted property development narrative, *Xanadu* narrates an idealized form of property development wholly inaccessible in reality in its pace and scale. There is no sign, for example, of the need for any negotiation with local authorities or of the auditorium's relationship to the community that surrounds it. If anything, the film suggests that it is within skating distance of Venice, while its real location is 10 miles away in Fairfax. The implication of this elision is that the transformation of the auditorium into Xanadu is of a piece with the culture that surrounds it, representationally displacing the populations about which Sass was most concerned: Fairfax's elderly Jewish communities and low-income young families. There is also no difficulty securing financing, or even any efforts depicted to gain financing. Yet roller rinks were themselves expensive and risky real estate ventures.[25] What is clear is that cinematic property development requires none of the bureaucratic hurdles that delayed and ultimately doomed the attempts to redevelop the Pan Pacific. That fantasy of property development is expressed via a special effects–laden musical sequence. The number "All Over the World" concludes with a sequence that cuts from Sonny and Kira dancing inside a clothes store to Danny watching then Sonny and Kira now dancing in dark pink light against a dark green image of the run-down Pan Pacific Auditorium. It is then lit up with multicolor neon bars across its maritime architecture, with the word "Xanadu" appearing lit up on the front of the building in the same design as the film's own logo. Earlier sequences also magically transform the built environment: after the muses emerge from the mural they shoot out across Los Angeles, one flying past the Hollywood sign trailing a blue streak behind her as the sign's letters light up with a white glow as she passes.

In his seminal essay "Entertainment and Utopia," Richard Dyer influentially argues that entertainment—exemplified by the musical, the genre most overtly and completely dedicated to entertainment as a principle—is utopian, a utopianism contained in an "affective code" operating on both representational and, crucially, non-representational levels.[26] He breaks entertainment's utopian sensibility down into five categories (energy, abundance, intensity, transparency, community) and argues that those categories respond to social inadequacies while simultaneously "defining and delimiting what constitute the legitimate needs of people in this society."[27] One way to understand Dyer's utopianism is as the feeling of success that capitalism promises to bestow but which is dependent for its charge on the reality of the tensions, conflicts, and lacks that capitalism itself produces. *Xanadu* very directly uses musical numbers and their affective qualities to explicitly convey that success, not only "All Over the World," but also "Xanadu" at the club's opening. The number begins with Danny encouraging everyone present in the club to join him as he skates around; they all then do so, joining in with a choreographed routine as other guests enter the club ducking juggling mimes. The number is organized to produce a sense not only of energy expressed via the skating, choreography, and pacey editing, but also of community and abundance, abundance not only of patrons but also of colors in the garish costumes and set design, all of which is amplified later in the number via split screen. Dyer's utopian qualities are used to express the club's inevitable success and present it as a triumph of property development.

That said, very few of *Xanadu*'s musical numbers are actually onstage performances of the kind Feuer describes; the only one that entirely fits is "Xanadu." The film is both an adaptation of the kinds of success narratives that have been central to the genre and one that does none of the work typical of those films to manage the anxiety of failure. It is simply not especially interested in the mechanics of success or failure. Any sequences that gesture toward explaining the club's development—such as the actual redevelopment of the venue itself or the purchasing of outfits for the opening night—either evade that possibility or swiftly move into fantasy. One number, "Dancin'," for example, visualizes Sonny and Danny's distinctly different visions for what the club could be, leading them to decide on a blend of the two. But how that blend is achieved, and why it would ever work, is elided. *Xanadu* has little interest in the demystification of entertainment, in giving "pleasure to the audience by revealing what goes on behind the scenes in the theater or Hollywood," as Feuer describes.[28] Despite Danny comparing the auditorium to the Titanic when he first sees it (not least prompted by its vaguely nautical design), the success of Xanadu the club is never in doubt. The film's version of success constitutes the achievement of its characters' ill-defined dreams, the speed with which they are accomplished, their identification with heterosexual romance that is so monumental as to disrupt the order of the universe, and the use of contemporary special effects to do so. The film deploys the genre's traditional optimism to express a fervent and unwavering belief in the transformative capacities of both cinematic technology and capital. The possibility of failure is not countenanced, and the actual mechanics of success are also entirely obscured, which as soon as the film itself went into contact with the realities of the market only came to enhance its absurdities. But while *Xanadu* might be dismissed as merely inept, I would suggest that *Xanadu*'s failure to succeed in the way that Xanadu does needs to be contextualized in a volatile and uncertain time for both the musical and Hollywood in general.

## PANIC

American cinema of the 1970s has been defined by failure. Thomas Elsaesser argues that such New Hollywood films were marked by the "pathos of failure," evident in their "unmotivated" heroes that spoke of a "radical skepticism about American virtues of ambition, vision, drive: themselves the unacknowledged, because firmly underpinning architecture of the classical Hollywood action genres."[29] Drehli Robnik has since characterized such accounts of the early 1970s—not just Elsaesser's but also Gilles Deleuze's argument that 1970s American cinema was experiencing a "crisis of the action-image"—as the "failure argument," one that understands the New Hollywood as the product of what Elsaesser calls a "period of historical stasis."[30] That stasis would shift later in the decade, with the neoliberal turn and, in Hollywood, the emergence of the blockbuster model. Jeffrey Sconce suggests that this transition cemented critical preoccupation with failure, which can be attributed in part to "Hollywood's own cynicism in creating increasingly calculated and artless product."[31] He also notes a more recent critical nostalgia for the auteurist 1970s.[32] That shift also saw Elsaesser's unmotivated heroes displaced by the return of protagonists with goals as straightforward as, say, blowing up the Death Star, or opening a roller disco.

One way that shift can be seen is genre: rather than the genre revisionism of the New Hollywood—including musicals like *New York, New York* and *All That Jazz* (Bob Fosse, 1979)—filmmakers like Spielberg, J. Hoberman argues, "specialized in putting genres back together."[33] *Xanadu* has much in common with the restorative impulse of the emerging Hollywood blockbuster, self-consciously putting the musical back together via its casting of Gene Kelly, its references to *Down to Earth* (Alexander Hall, 1947), in which Rita Hayworth plays the muse Terpsichore posing as a Broadway starlet, and another Hayworth musical, *Cover Girl* (Charles Vidor, 1944), in which Kelly also plays a character called Danny McGuire (who is not a clarinetist, however), and its nostalgia. That nostalgia is most overt in the number "Whenever You're Away from Me," which begins with Danny sitting back in a chair and muttering to himself, "I remember everything," as a vision of his younger self playing with a band alongside a singer played by Olivia Newton-John (the film suggests this is also Kira) is superimposed in the right of the frame. Newton-John is then superimposed into the spacious room in Danny's house in which he is recollecting, and they proceed to dance together. This number is markedly different musically and choreographically from the rest of the film, clearly recalling earlier Kelly numbers: in the pairing of the dancers' movements side by side in a relatively empty space it recalls "Main Street" from *On the Town* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1949), for example. Yet rather than seamlessly putting the genre back together, the nostalgia the number generates derives not only from its retro stylings but also from the sense of loss it produces through the comparisons it invites with the dynamic performances of Kelly's youth, as well as those of his costars.

The late 1970s moment of transition was untidy. David Cook argues that the period was marked by a skittish lack of clarity about what actually constituted a blockbuster and what would conversely be a recipe for box-office disaster. One striking example was the wholly unexpected runaway success of *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), which produced "widespread panic" among studio executives, but others include the "puzzling and unnerving" unforeseen success of smaller films that became "overnight sensations" such as *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976) and *Smokey and the Bandit* (Hal Needham, 1977).[34] Alongside those surprise hits were also surprise failures, including musicals like *The Wiz* (Sidney Lumet, 1978). Cook argues that "in the absence of any body of professional knowledge that could guarantee success," studios relied on genre; yet "often they failed, and a large number of the decade's intended blockbusters sank beneath their own weight, encountering widespread public indifference."[35] Bach cites a series of "smash-flops" indictive of this widespread uncertainty and industrial volatility: films ranging from *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) to *Flash Gordon* (Mike Hodges, 1980).[36] Whether seen in terms of the loss of the New Hollywood or an ongoing debasement of classical Hollywood, the "panic" of the period is easily papered over.

*Xanadu* is a product of precisely that context of panic and messy transition. It was originally planned by co-producers Lawrence Gordon and Joel Silver as "a low budget quickie designed to cash in on the roller disco craze."[37] While the popularity of roller discos as a leisure habit was high—with one in eight Americans frequenting roller rinks by 1979—the industry was relatively slow to capitalize.[38] That partly reflected an uncertain environment for what Richard Nowell calls "youth-oriented musical movies"; while *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977), *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978), and *Thank God It's Friday* (Robert Klane, 1978) had been hits, others including *American Hot Wax* (Floyd Mutrux, 1978), *FM* (John A. Alonzo, 1978), and *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* (Robert Zemeckis, 1978) had not.[39] In Gordon's account, *Xanadu*'s budget quickly grew as a result of a desire to "raise the level of the film creatively above that of other roller disco films"; it was expanded into a "fully-fledged musical fantasy," playing down the "roller disco angle," after the release of two other roller disco films—*Skatetown, U.S.A.* (William A. Levey, 1979) and *Roller Boogie* (Mark L. Lester, 1979), both commercial failures—and to further distinguish the film from *Can't Stop the Music*, set to be released imminently.[40] Nowell argues that after their failure, "marketing executives at Universal . . . to the amusement of industry-watchers, went to great lengths in summer 1980 to conceal the wealth of content that *Xanadu* shared with the increasingly unpopular craze."[41] The producers added Gene Kelly, the Electric Light Orchestra, and 400 dancers, resulting in an eventual budget of $14 million. The original budget had been $4.5 million.[42] Much of the film can be understood in terms of this lack of clarity about what kind of film it should or could be. But it is also worth noting that the film coexisted with and was understood alongside other notable failures of the period.

The most glaring example is *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980), so glaring that its failure was the subject of an entire book, Steven Bach's *Final Cut*.[43] Richard Nowell writes that on *Xanadu*'s release, "Universal could not prevent *Xanadu* from being seen alongside Michael Cimino's Western *Heaven's Gate* as the biggest box-office failure of

1980."[44] Thus *Heaven's Gate* and *Xanadu*, two films with little in common besides being volatile productions named after roller discos, came to be yoked together in industrial discourse of the time. Scholarship has privileged New Hollywood auteurist failures over the likes of *Xanadu* but has also done so in ways that present that failure as inevitable. Both Bach and David Cook locate the causes of the period's most spectacular auteurist failures in the texts themselves, taking them as synecdoche for the failings of the industry. For Bach, perceptions of *Heaven's Gate*'s failure "came not only from awareness of the scandalously undisciplined method of its manufacture but also from a deeper, more disturbing failure of discipline in the film itself," where narratological efficiency was "sacrificed to the filmmaker's love of visual effect and production for their own sakes."[45] For Cook, *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) was "plagued by illness in the cast and crew, natural disasters, and other logistical problems that nearly tripled its costs," and those conditions produced a "flawed, if brilliant" film that was "widely viewed by the press as a symptom of an industry out of control."[46] Cook draws a direct line between out-of-control production conditions, out-of-control marketing, and out-of-control texts: the failure is self-evident and logical from production to text to promotion to reception. The revenge of the suits, eager to wrest control of the industry back into their hands and away from the more artistically inclined filmmaking of the New Hollywood, is by the dominant historiographical accounts of the period an inevitable response to a lack of creative discipline. But while the failures of exploitation genre films and the auteurist excesses of late New Hollywood are typically considered separately, *Xanadu* is a good example of how they were in fact intertwined.

The studio space where *Xanadu* was shot was also the site of what *Variety* in 1984 called "Hollywood's most intriguing real estate question": Hollywood General Studios.[47] A few months before principal photography on *Xanadu* began in September 1979, Francis Ford Coppola entered in negotiation to assume control of the studio lot, eventually gaining ownership in March 1980.[48] During the production of *Xanadu*, Coppola's deal was in progress, and he had been occupying HGS offices and conference rooms since July 1979.[49] Coppola's vision for Zoetrope was an "all-resident motion-picture production company, a team, a happy artistic community" modeled on major Hollywood studios in the 1930s, but with contracts that, according to the *New York Times*, "will be sufficiently flexible to allow actors and directors a freedom not possible under the old system."[50] It was a logical successor to the Directors Company, Coppola's (ultimately unsuccessful) 1973 arrangement with Paramount, as well as William Friedkin and Peter Bogdanovich, that gave those directors generous creative control and access to funding, which J. D. Connor describes as an attempt to "institutionalize an auteurist mode of production."[51] Central to Zoetrope, however, was the musical. Coppola tasked Gene Kelly with putting together a dedicated musicals production unit comparable to MGM's studio-era Freed Unit, overseeing the production of musicals—with three in development in addition to *One from the Heart* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1982), including an early version of *Tucker: The Man and His Dream* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1988), which Coppola planned to cowrite with Betty Comden and Adolph Green—as well as developing new on- and off-screen talent and forging links with the record industry.[52] Freed was a good model for a studio run by the talent, as a major producer with a creative background as a songwriter. In effect, then, it was not only a power base for the auteurist mode of filmmaking that had emerged in the New Hollywood, but also an attempt to revive the old studio system, in a form that would not constrain but facilitate creativity.

For Jon Lewis, Zoetrope was "one of the boldest moves in the history of the movie business" and unsettled "the studio establishment."[53] However, less than a year after Coppola's acquisition of the lot was finalized, it was in serious financial trouble, largely due to the escalating budget of *One From the Heart* and the troubled production of *Hammett* (Wim Wenders, 1982). In February 1984 it was auctioned to a Canadian real estate developer.[54] Lewis contests the perception that "Coppola bankrupted the studio by making an overly expensive and terrible movie that nobody went to see and the critics all hated."[55] Instead, elevated interest rates, budgets, and profits led to "further vertical integration and multinationalization," meaning "Zoetrope was doomed before it ever got off the ground."[56] For Coppola, what ensured that failure was his perceived lack of discipline: "*One from the Heart* suffered from the perception of me as some wild, egomaniac, Donald Trump type of guy, and once they think about you that way, it's just so many months before you're brought down."[57]

There are striking parallels between *Xanadu*'s and Coppola's vision. Both sought to revive the Hollywood musical from its post-studio era slumber and used Gene Kelly to do so (not only did Coppola hire Kelly to choreograph *One from the Heart*'s dance sequences, but Kelly was also assisted by *Xanadu*'s choreographer, Kenny Ortega).[58] Furthermore, *Xanadu*'s narrative invokes precisely the kind of conflict between creatives and suits that drove Coppola and Zoetrope. At the start of the film, Sonny works for a record label making "assembly-line art," painting what other people tell him to paint: enlargements of the label's album covers. He repeatedly fights with his manager, who wants him to "start doing things the company way," rather than incorporating his own personal flourishes, telling Sonny that if everyone started painting what they wanted, "that's not a company; that's chaos." Scenes like this are not especially convincing on their own terms, the kind of nonsensical writing of a "bad film": what personal art, in the form of painting, could Sonny ever hope to accomplish at a *record label*? Why is a record label even employing painters? Why would Sonny's desire to be an artist lead him to open a nightclub? When he questions Danny and Kira about his involvement, they both tell him he has "a good eye" and leave it at that. Much of the film's heavy-handed but vague dialogue can only be read allegorically. What we are seeing is a conflict between an Artist and a Suit, and this artist has Dreams that cannot be accomplished in corporate structures, so he must leave and start his own alternative venture.

That allegorical reading is especially apparent in the parallels between the film's record label and a movie studio, most obvious in the number "Suddenly." Here Sonny brings Kira into what he describes as a special recording studio for "only the biggest groups," where they are able to "flash all sorts of pictures on screens" for "inspiration." This is not an especially accurate description of what we actually see. Sonny and Kira enter the studio by opening a large door that brings a stream of light into an otherwise dark space, the sort of iconography of entering an empty soundstage typical of what

Steven Cohan calls the "backstudio picture."[59] More specifically, it clearly recalls the shot where Don (Gene Kelly) and Kathy (Debbie Reynolds) do the same in *Singin' in the Rain*, before performing "You Were Meant for Me." After Sonny and Kira enter the studio they skate to a booth where they set off projected images and play music before skating out into the studio. But not only are there images projected for inspiration but also a series of sets that Sonny and Kira skate through: first, a cityscape backdrop reminiscent of a studio-era Hollywood movie, accompanied by props and other pieces of set such that they are skating around an urban rooftop; later a desert island set with a desert backdrop, including a giant fan (again recalling "You Were Meant for Me"), used to mimic a storm; finally, a bench they are startled to discover is at a level crossing. The rain that appears is clearly an optical effect—not even a projected backdrop—rather than anything actually occurring in the studio, yet Sonny and Kira act as if they are being rained on and umbrellas are lowered from the ceiling. This studio space makes far more sense as a movie studio soundstage than it does a recording studio.[60]

*Xanadu* invites reading its otherwise highly confusing "record label" as a movie studio; meanwhile its nightclub is above all a space for staging musical numbers. In ways that do not translate to a coherent narrative, the film understands the shifts going on industrially that were leading to a generic shift, which I discuss below, toward the dance film, the high-concept music-driven film, the musical biopic. Sonny's rebellion against his record label boss makes him comparable to the male filmmaker that Cohan argues has been central to the backstudio picture since the 1970s: "Whether maverick or outlaw, artist or hack, dreamer or hustler, the filmmaker may stand up to studio bosses, but he usually cannot defeat their overriding concern with the bottom line."[61] Backstudio pictures reoriented themselves toward narrating the disciplining of maverick artists, doomed to fail. Yet unlike Cohan's examples, Sonny succeeds. The very fact of his success therefore places the film outside of the contemporary direction of travel. Connor argues that the transformations of the late 1970s need to be reframed: during the New Hollywood, "each director's success was not only an advertisement for his own authorship; it hinted at a model that might reoccupy the space once held by the classical studio."[62] But what that model might be depended on "how one accounted for a film's success in the first place":

> If success were the logical outcome of the production system, then the essential condition for the success of the New Hollywood would be the autonomy accorded directors. Understood that way, the generalization of the model should take the form of a broadening of the auteurist model of production. But if the mode of production were less important than the particular narratives that might emerge from it, the generalization of auteurist success would require nearly the opposite approach, the assertion of narrative control.[63]

*Xanadu*, by contrast, was not only an out-of-control production, but also constructs a success narrative that celebrates a lack of control, especially from executives. Xanadu the club is in effect a site for artistic expression outside of an excessively disciplined system, an achievement that could only elude Coppola and Zoetrope in reality and further cements the film's divergence from contemporary industrial and aesthetic transformations.

## INCOHERENCE

The problem with *Xanadu*'s emphasis on creativity and art away from the restrictions of management is that it is very clearly not only a studio product but also one devoid of any of the impulse toward artistry that apparently animates its characters. While Sonny might dream of becoming a great artist, he does so in a film conceived as an exploitation film, precisely the kind of "assembly-line art" he rails against, and one whose ultimate artistic creation is an astonishingly garish and tasteless roller disco. Throughout its production, *Xanadu* was caught between different projects: on the one hand, its roots as a cheap roller disco cash-in; on the other, a clear desire to create a modern musical blockbuster on the scale of *Grease*, all the more apparent in the casting of Newton-John. What neither of those projects allowed for, other than through sheer profligacy, was the film's textual preoccupation with artistic freedom and a rejection of corporate discipline. And yet *Xanadu*'s lack of discipline was not only an objection at the level of narrative but also a defining feature of its aesthetics.

One clear example is the film's use of special effects. In the wake of *Star Wars*, special effects held a new prominence that according to Julie Turnock "affected nearly all areas of production, marketing, and distribution."[64] Dan North suggests that special effects by their nature challenge the spectator to "perceive the joints between composited elements." If the discrepancies between "the real and its simulation" are "too jarringly pronounced," they are dismissed as "bad," reminding us "too forcibly that Superman is not really flying or that the Titanic is just a glorified bath toy bobbing in a pond on the studio backlot."[65] Yet this assumption that such "joints" should not be too visible is an effect of the dominance in the early phases of the blockbuster era of Industrial Light and Magic (ILM), which produced effects for the *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* films. Turnock argues that the success of ILM's photorealist style "effectively crushed" other effects styles, which now appear as "foreclosed possibilities."[66] *Xanadu*'s effects were an example of one of those possibilities, a "hugely prevalent style" at the time that came to be known as the "candy apple neon look": "enticing dazzling, futuristic, high tech—and a bit mechanistic."[67] While ILM provided the model for a disciplined effects style, *Xanadu*'s "candy apple neon look" was so devoted to futuristic excess that it includes an alien spaceship circling the Universal logo even though the film itself includes precisely zero references to aliens or outer space.

The film's special effects were put together by R/Greenberg Associates, brought in by producer Joel Silver during pre-production as he believed "important special effects sequences could be an essential part of the film's promotion."[68] Marketing here comes to determine the text itself. For Greenberg one of the primary ways the effects team signaled that Kira and her sister muses "possess qualities which separate them from ordinary mortals" was "glow."[69] Great care was taken to produce a glowing outline of each of the muses using diffusion filters. At the muses' first appearances, when their mural comes to life, each muse drawing becomes a dancer with a colored, glowing outline. That sequence was shot before a blue screen specifically in order to produce that glow; Greenberg argued that "rotoscoping the dancers to produce a glow would never have looked as smooth as using mattes optically produced with the blue screen process."[70] The neon aesthetic style here so sharply separates the dancers from their environment that it not only visually reinforces the indication that Kira is both not of this world and technological but also calls attention to the effects themselves. That visibility of the effects is most apparent in the sequence in which Sonny, after skating headfirst into the muse mural, arrives in the realm that Kira has come from and to which she has returned. That realm is visualized as beams of colored light against a black background, the same yellow/orange color as Kira's glow when she appears. It most closely resembles the visualizations of cyberspace in films like *Tron*, 1970s arcade games, or what Scott Bukatman calls "terminal space," "the realm of virtual reality and real-time, interactive, computer-generated environments."[71] The sequence is not only highly visually distinct from the rest of the film but also, through association with terminal space, identifies the muses with technology itself, thereby calling even more attention to the film's own production processes.

The film's effects are most identified with Kira herself, who enables a transformation of the "real," photographic world, which the film ties to still images (the mural) coming to life (glowing, dancing muses emerging from it), all of which is soundtracked by a song called "I'm Alive." Laura Mulvey argues that cinema's fundamental tension between stillness and movement is by extension one between life and death:

> In the cinema organic movement is transformed from its inorganic replica, a series of static, inanimate, images, which, once projected, then become animated to blur the distinctions between the oppositions. The homologies extend: on the one hand, the inanimate, inorganic, still, dead; on the other, organic, animate, moving, alive.[72]

Kira is an agent of animation, bringing to life a dead building and a dead genre as well as a still mural, coming from a realm outside the life cycle, space, and time (her mythological parents ask each other questions like, "which is earlier and which is later?" and "all these centuries, or is it minutes?"). The number "The Fall," a Venice montage that concludes with Sonny entering Kira's otherworldly realm, expresses that longing for an animation only possible through her intervention and repeats the lyric "it's alive." This identification of Kira with animation, then, also accounts for the film's inclusion of a cel-animated sequence, one of the film's most jarring aesthetic shifts.

Kira is depicted as technological in ways that are not entirely rationalized or explained within the narrative. Sonny meets her for the second time after he stops in front of the Pan Pacific Auditorium after recognizing it from the album cover she has mysteriously appeared on and hears music coming from inside, Olivia Newton-John's "Magic." When he enters, he firstly sees nothing; Kira then appears, not singing at all but skating, only to subsequently dissolve in and out of the frame. This sequence establishes that everything Kira does is possible due to the capabilities of contemporary cinematic technology, capabilities the narrative errs from explaining, except via vague allusions to magic. Kira, or else the voice of Newton-John (and it's unclear whether we are meant to take them to be identical throughout), also appears on one of Danny's old records; her physical form is later conjured up as a superimposition, then joins Danny in a dance number, the temporality and spatiality of which is also never explained. When Kira later does try to explain herself, she convinces Sonny she is a muse by manipulation of technology. She first instructs him to read the dictionary entry for "muse," which inexplicably ends, "And do you believe me now, Sonny?" This still fails to convince him; what succeeds is when she turns on his TV to a black-and-white 1930s style gangster film, where the actors directly address Sonny, by name, and then Kira herself appears as one of its characters. Kira's magical behavior is granted the loosest possible motivation with little of the controlling framework provided by narrative causality. This excess is at the root of the film's "badness": narrative seams are visible but not addressed.

One other way the new disciplined Hollywood asserted itself was a synergistic use of music. The hugely successful cross-promotion of the soundtracks for *A Star Is Born* (Frank Pierson, 1976) and *Saturday Night Fever* a few weeks before the films' release provided a measure to manage a commercially uncertain environment.[73] The success of *Saturday Night Fever* prompted the development of what J. P. Telotte termed the "new Hollywood musical": films including *The Rose* (Mark Rydell, 1979), *Footloose* (Herbert Ross, 1984), and *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolino, 1987), where songs and dances are "identified as performances and thus bound by the natural limitations that normally attend such circumscribed events."[74] The new Hollywood musical more thoroughly integrated music and musical performance into the narrative to the point that performers were necessarily professionals or with performances otherwise logically explained, and, very often, singing was eliminated altogether. Justin Wyatt argues that in such high-concept films "the excess created by the conjunction of music and image creates a module separate from the narrative, working against the sequential structuring of the film" that is differentiated from the classical musical due to "the high concept films' emphasis on frenetic editing, rather than continuous action in a low number of shots, and a lack of dramatic purpose to the musical numbers."[75]

*Xanadu*'s numbers often lack dramatic purpose, but they also lack rationalization. The film's development of hit singles and a soundtrack album, released by MCA (also owned by its studio Universal), was entirely in line with the contemporary synergistic orthodoxy. Yet *Xanadu* is a more unruly text than, say, *Flashdance* (Adrian Lyne, 1983). Sean Griffin suggests *Xanadu* "seemed more interested in creating an LP that had one side of Olivia Newton-John songs and one side of cuts from the Electric Light Orchestra than in creating a film."[76] There are certainly moments in the film where its soundtrack becomes obtrusive: when Sonny leads Kira into a recording studio reserved for all the biggest artists, the song we hear is "Suddenly," a Cliff Richard/Olivia Newton-John duet. Rather than the audio dissolve Rick Altman identifies in musical numbers—"the movement from diegetic sound without music through diegetic music to non-diegetic music without diegetic sound"—here the music is diegetic in that we literally see Sonny press play on equipment in the recording booth, but with non-diegetic origins.[77] Newton-John's voice is technologically disconnected from her body; we are surely meant to recognize the vocal as hers, but its narratological status is uncertain and goes unaddressed (is this one of Kira's technological transgressions?). While the source of the music is explained, the music itself is not. Kay Dickinson sees this sense of the different elements of a film not quite fitting together, especially in terms of music, as particularly representative of post-Fordist synergistic film production. She suggests that the "musical unit" can seem simultaneously integral and extractable when it works well but "can also scream its independence and market availability too loudly, meaning that we reject it, and its enveloping film framework, along with the threat of accelerated product fragmentation."[78] This is precisely the sort of objection that Griffin reaches: "Suddenly" calls our attention to not only the soundtrack but also the soundtrack album and no effort is made to explain its place in the narrative. And it seems all the more obtrusive coming in a film that is forever signaling that it wants to be taken as a reanimated form of the classical musical.

In both its affection for the 1940s musical and its modularity, *Xanadu* is visibly, and awkwardly, straddling musical traditions at a time of generic transition, explicitly displaying its seams rather than smoothly concealing them. The film includes a sequence in which a 1940s swing band and a 1980s rock band, playing in the separate imaginations of two different characters, appear on stages next to each other, and as the two stages move together their musical styles merge into one song. It brings its clashes of style to our attention; the candy apple neon effects, the unstable soundtrack of "Suddenly," and the dissolves of "Whenever You're Away from Me" textually foreground such clashes. A core element of *Xanadu*'s "failure" is its very clear ramming together of disparate elements. Entirely fitting for a moment of wild industrial panic, particularly when it came to the musical, *Xanadu* is a film visibly coming apart at the seams. Or to use North's formulation, it makes its joints excessively visible.

## CONCLUSION

Coming apart at the seams would appear to be a perennial risk of the musical as a form, with its structuring contrasts between narrative and number and attendant shifts between aesthetic registers. It is the fact that musical numbers "interrupt, arrest, or exceed the flow of narrative more often than they stimulate it" that leads Steven Cohan to argue that the identification of the musical with camp lies "in a film's textual specificity—starting with the genre's own incongruous binary logic—rather than from projection."[79] It is a genre especially prone to excess as Kristin Thompson has defined it: "at that point where motivation fails, excess begins."[80] While David Bordwell plays down the potential for the studio-era musical's stylization to seem "outrageous and jolting" because such "bursts of stylization . . . remain tied to the classical norm in that the norm defines the duration and range of permissible stylization," as Groo's critique would suggest, this argument can only do so much to account for the peculiarities of both individual texts and a genre as prone to excess as the musical.[81] But what of those films that "fail" precisely because they *do* seem outrageous and jolting? Matthew Tinkcom's discussion of earlier examples of "failed" musicals, *Yolanda and the Thief* (Vincente Minnelli, 1945) and *The Pirate*, contrasts them with later Freed Unit musicals that would "more carefully balance the camp visual elements . . . with the demands for more 'streamlined' (i.e. assertively heteronormative) narrative." *The Pirate*, in particular, "stands as a kind of beautiful failure that tampers with capital's attempts to capture all forms of physical and intellectual exertion in the name of profit."[82] *Xanadu* and *The Pirate* are both examples of the genre's inherent potential to exceed aesthetic norms, to appear undisciplined, to fail.

Richard Maltby compares the success of *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1996) to the failure of *Heaven's Gate*. The former also ran wildly over schedule and over budget—and, of course, narrates the story of a notorious, costly failure—but its huge commercial success on release allowed James Cameron to appear "a 'fiscally responsible auteur' whose personal vision had resulted in a commercially immensely successful product, justifying its budgetary excesses by its unprecedented profits." *Titanic* was itself also not especially coherent. Maltby argues that its "commercial success relied not on the movie's underlying aesthetic unity or coherence, but rather on the sheer diversity of its various elements, which allowed its different audiences to turn it into the experience they wished to have." Maltby concludes that "*Titanic*'s aesthetic success was dependent on its commercial success to the same extent as *Heaven's Gate*'s aesthetic failure was dependent on its commercial failure."[83] Kay Dickinson argues that films that "don't work" are therefore instructive: "Without even realizing it, the market as it stands exposes its own vulnerability and thus unwittingly sabotages itself a little every time it lets loose a mismatch into the world."[84] *Titanic* was on one level thoroughly undisciplined in the excesses of its production, but on another a film closely attuned to the demands of the market, smoothly combining genres and therefore demographics in a way that assured its commercial success. A film like *Xanadu*, while a product of that same context, also clearly does not fit such demands.

From one perspective, *Xanadu*'s particular aesthetic and form of nostalgia was simply not a good fit for 1980. Unlike the despectacularized dance films that would be most successful in the 1980s, *Xanadu* has more in common with more recent heavily VFX-driven musicals such as *Moulin Rouge!* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001) and *The Greatest Showman* (Michael Gracey, 2017), finding broad audiences despite some vehement critical and scholarly distaste. Similarly, *Xanadu*'s affection for the 1940s would not find an equivalent cultural phenomenon until the swing revival a good fifteen years later, which would share not only its impulses and references but also its aesthetics: see the garish zoot suit of *The Mask* (Chuck Russell, 1994), for example. But *Xanadu* also stood at the origin of a pervasive uneasiness about the musical as a genre, at least in the form that *Xanadu* understands it. Steven Cohan noted in 2010 that since the 1980s there had been a widespread lack of confidence in the musical whereby efforts to revive the genre were overshadowed by a "way of thinking" that "maintains that musicals are . . . incompatible with the filmic medium as experienced today," out of a "naïve or at least unwarranted sense of fidelity to cinematic realism."[85] While since *Moulin Rouge!* and *Chicago* (Rob Marshall, 2002), musicals have been produced with some regularity, their industrial and popular status remains tenuous. Cohan suggests of *The Phantom of the Opera* (Joel Schumacher, 2004), *The Producers* (Susan Stroman, 2005), and *Rent* (Chris Columbus, 2005), for example, "Their failures beclouded the genre's future yet again."[86] He further observes that no high-profile contemporary musical "has resulted in anything resembling a genuine comeback for the genre, certainly nothing compared to what happened in the US in 1933."[87] So while every year sees a deluge of think pieces in the popular media about whether the musical is now "back," it simply isn't—and won't be, because to become the genre it was in the studio era would require a revival of the studio system that produced it. Without that system's protections, the musical's aesthetic excesses render it especially risky.

Since the likes of *Xanadu* and its moment of failure, however, musicals have been closely attuned to that risk, produced on an understanding of the genre as already failed, building that risk into the texts themselves. *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016), for example, is fundamentally about anxieties around success fantasies: the risk of never succeeding and the loss entailed in doing so. Again, *The Greatest Showman* provides a useful point of comparison. P. T. Barnum is one of Sandage's key examples of nineteenth-century failed businessmen, one who narrated his own career trajectory in his autobiography, a "hoax-by-hoax retelling of its author's rise," and whose failure provoked a "carnival of schadenfreude."[88] His preoccupation with trickery and speculation was indicative of a redefinition of white masculinity in terms of the risky venture.[89] In the film, Barnum (Hugh Jackman) is a scammer whose audiences delight in the pleasures of knowing fakery; this is what the film's dismissive critic can never understand. The film narrates Barnum's success, and by extension the success of the genre through the use of musical numbers to do so, and explicitly declares that it is doing so. The opening number "The Greatest Show" tells us not only that what we are about to see is "the greatest show," but also "don't fight it" and "it's everything you ever want, everything you ever need," assuming that we need to be sold on the film (and genre) we're watching using the excessive promotional methods of a circus ringleader. The film anticipates not only the rejection of critics but also increasing hostility from a reactionary public that burns Barnum's theater down. The final act of the film recounts Barnum's commitment, expressed via the number "From Now On," to revive his circus. The film builds failure, critical scorn, and popular rejection into its own narrative. Whereas *Xanadu*'s commercial and critical failure makes the text's unbending belief in its own success all the more ludicrous, *The Greatest Showman* takes no such chances. The musical may not be "back," but it has learned from its history of failure.

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# CHAPTER 21

# "AN INESCAPABLE FAILURE"

## The Little Prince, *Realism, and the Golden Age*

### KATY JAYASURIYA

*The Little Prince* (1974) is a film musical adaptation of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's novella of the same name (1943). It was directed by Stanley Donen (*Singin' in the Rain*, 1952; *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, 1954; *Funny Face*, 1957) with a script and score by renowned Broadway and Hollywood collaborators Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe (*Brigadoon*, 1947; *My Fair Lady*, 1956; *Camelot*, 1960). Since its release, the film musical has sunk into obscurity, never listed among the canon of works attributed to the key figures involved, and largely neglected by film and music scholars. A study of its production history, however, reveals that while it may have been a critical and commercial failure, it is still an important film worthy of attention. *The Little Prince* represents a genre in crisis: an internal struggle between Golden Age values and the kind of cinematic realism that was driving the Hollywood industry at the time of its release.

The 1970s was a pivotal decade for the Hollywood film industry as it tried to keep up with a society undergoing a momentous transition in thought and culture. The global shift from industrialism to post-industrialism, alongside major political events, threw societal norms and conventions into question. As monstrous images of the Vietnam War pervaded American homes via the TV (a medium that had previously been a source of comfort through escapism), and liberation movements forced society to confront its inequalities, Robin Wood notes, "the possibility suddenly opened up that the whole world might have to be re-created."[1] The result was a shift in perception and reception that had a major impact on popular culture, and has since been described by J. David Hoeveler as "the postmodernist turn."[2] Convention could no longer satisfy a society which had lost what was once a stable sense of reality.

> The recurring motif in 1970s culture is the dismantling of inherited forms, descriptive norms, sharp and inclusive modes of categorization; instead, we have the blurring of distinctions, the mixing of forms, a discomfort with preciseness in signification.[3]

This shifting landscape had a disastrous impact on the film industry as it grappled with the changing tides. Between 1969 and 1971, the major studios saw $500 million in losses and an all-time low in average weekly film attendance. But this recession carried with it an opportunity. "The true era of 'Nobody knows anything,'" as described by Peter Lev, was a "period of uncertainty and disarray in the Hollywood film industry,"[4] and without the predictability of formulaic filmmaking the industry was forced (or else, had an opportunity) to make changes. They fought this recession twofold: they employed a younger generation of directors to establish American "auteur cinema" that would compete with contemporary European filmmakers, while producing blockbusters driven by technological innovation to attract a mass audience.

Where did this leave the film musical, a genre that, as Raymond Knapp notes, has attracted the "well-established belief, shared by fans and detractors alike," that "musicals, whether on stage or on screen, are less concerned with reality than with escaping it?"[5] By the late 1960s, film musicals that reproduced conventions established during the studio system were no longer relevant or effective. The idealist approach (that sought to recreate the resounding success of *The Sound of Music*, 1965) could not engage a disenchanted and disenfranchised audience. It is therefore not surprising that the successful film musicals of the 1970s were those that chose edgier, grittier topics, that better suited a realist approach, for example, *Cabaret* (1972) and *All That Jazz* (1979). They, like their non-musical counterparts, "dismantled inherited forms" and undermined convention. Knapp describes how the film adaptation of *Cabaret* achieved this: "by eliminating (nearly) all songs that take place outside the Kit-Kat Klub, and dropping the main sublot that those songs advance," the film offered a "sense of realism." Bob Fosse removed the songs that would conventionally function to advance a "character driven plot," and instead used "cross-cutting between the cabaret setting and the world around it," to show the parallels between the two worlds that would enable the audience to also see parallels between "the thuggery of the Nazis and the grotesqueries unfolding on the cabaret stage . . . as they each spiralled out of control."[6] The use of film editing to blur the distinction between artifice (the stage) and reality (Nazi Germany) demonstrated what Hoeveler describes as a "discomfort with preciseness in signification and representation."

Other successful film musicals were those that targeted the youth market through their use of popular music genres. Both *Nashville* (1975) and *A Star Is Born* (1976) provided a narrative for diegetic songs, which like *Cabaret*, made the films more appealing for an audience that was falling out of love with non-diegetic styles. But ultimately during this decade commercial success was the exception rather than the rule, and audiences had become, as noted by Dominic McHugh, "ambivalent about the genre."[7]

*The Little Prince* is particularly well placed for a discussion of the evolution of the genre and how it was impacted by the "postmodernist turn," as its production demonstrates the conflict between Golden Age values and postmodern influences. Furthermore, a reception study shows how the genre carried with it the burden of expectation. As Donen, Lerner, and Loewe had founded their success during the Golden Age, their collaboration was expected to be a return to this idiom. Thus, the film musical was destined to be judged by whether or not it fulfills a nostalgic longing for what reviewer Vincent Canby described as a "lost artform."[8] The following sections will demonstrate how these two facets were at the heart of *The Little Prince*'s "inescapable failure,"[9] as termed by one reviewer. By analyzing draft screenplays alongside the film, with anecdotal evidence and correspondence, we will find that where Lerner championed stylistic qualities reminiscent of his earlier works, Donen enforced a more realist approach that would resonate with the changing tides. Their conflicting visions resulted in a film inconsistent in style and jarringly out of step with audience expectation. First, though, it is necessary to provide a genesis of the film musical to understand how these visions were first formed.

## THE GENESIS OF *THE LITTLE PRINCE* AS A FILM MUSICAL

Saint-Exupéry's novella is about a pilot who has crashed in the Sahara Desert and meets a Little Prince from Asteroid B-612 who has a remarkable story to tell. After falling in love with a beautiful rose that grew on his planet, the Prince decided to leave on a quest for self-betterment and explore the many planets of the universe. On his travels through space (aided by a flock of birds) he meets with a king, a "very vain man," a drunkard, a businessman, a lamplighter, and a geographer, all of whom teach him something important about life. His final destination is Earth, and it is here he meets with a fox who wants a friend, a snake who has more sinister motivations, and the pilot who acts as the narrator. During his journey the Little Prince discovers a secret that provides the essence to Saint-Exupéry's novella: "One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eye."[10] This story, while dressed as a children's fable, is one of universal value. Covering a variety of vast settings (in Space and on Earth) and concepts (life, death, and loss), the heavy material is made lighter and more accessible through Saint-Exupéry's charming illustrations and engaging narrative. It is an observation of human nature in our search for what is important in life. The novel has achieved staggering success; selling over 1.8 million copies per year, *The Little Prince* is the most translated book ever published (excluding religious works).[11]

The popularity of the book made it an appealing one to filmmakers, so when lawyer Joseph Tandet obtained the rights to the novel he was inundated with requests from writers, directors, and actors, who all wanted to be involved with something that had so much potential. The first writer linked to the project was Dale Wasserman (*Man of La Mancha*, 1965) whose own treatment of the material would be "a Wizard of Oz of the Asteroids"—"to capitalize on the Space Age, the Aviator is an astronaut. He travels from planet to planet and *The Little Prince* travels with him."[12] This, however, was not to pass and instead Tandet contacted Lerner, who he had "always thought" would be "perfect to write the film script."[13] "About five years ago," Lerner recalls, "I got a letter from a lawyer who represented the widow of the author, Madam de Saint-Exupéry. He wanted to know if I'd be interested. I said 'yes,' but had no idea if it would be a film, play or what. . . . I just knew I adored it!"[14] Tandet continues the story in his memoir:[15] "I sent him a note saying

I would like him to write the film script for 'The Little Prince.' To my amazement the next day the phone rang. 'Mr. Lerner will meet you at the Regency for breakfast next Thursday at 8 A.M.'" At this meeting Lerner made it known that he wanted to create "a movie based on that beautiful book." He told Tandet: "I have a three-picture deal with Paramount. The first is *Paint Your Wagon*, the second is *On a Clear Day*, and I would like the third to be *Le Petit Prince.*" Tandet agreed and before Lerner had found a composer, he began writing the script and lyrics. Once the manuscript was finished agent Irving Lazar sent it to Loewe, and their collaboration was confirmed in August 1971.[16]

At this point it is important to note not only Lerner's enthusiasm for the project, but that its potential drew Loewe out of his retirement and reunited the collaborators after a ten-year hiatus. In an interview with Chevy Foster publicizing the reunion (in 1972), Loewe gives some explanation: "I read the story. It was delightful . . . but I knew only Lerner could write the script and lyrics that would interest me. And when I saw the completed manuscript, it was so marvellous, I couldn't resist."[17] For both writer and composer there was an attachment to the source material and a belief that they were the right people for the job.

The adaptation of a novel was not unchartered territory for Lerner and Loewe. When discussing their collaboration, Loewe said: "I've always thought *The Little Prince* could only be done by Lerner. . . . He has a poetry, a knowledge of a treatment for a musical that's his personal, magnificent talent."[18] This "knowledge of a treatment" had already been applied to three musical adaptations, Broadway musical *My Fair Lady* (1956) (based on George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*), film musical *Gigi* (1958) (based on Colette's novella of the same name), and Broadway musical *Camelot* (1960) (based on T. H White's novel *The Once and Future King*). It was during the writing of *My Fair Lady* that Lerner and Loewe found their favorite style of writing:

> For years, Fritz and I floundered around, trying to find our natural way of writing. "My Fair Lady" revealed it to us. The property dictates it. The characters in the story. We are the means by which they express, not vice versa. So it's better they be in somebody else's story. Your own are too accommodating. They stay flat, the easier for you to pin songs on. Without their resistance to give you an original springboard into your lyrics, your score doesn't come off.[19]

As well as being a familiar medium, *The Little Prince* also involved the kind of fantastical elements that Lerner had worked with before. In *Brigadoon* an American stumbles across a Scottish town that only appears for one day in every hundred years. After falling in love with one of the town's occupants, he must decide whether he should turn his back on contemporary society in favor of this mythical town where love, friendship, and loyalty are valued above all else. Like *The Little Prince*, *Brigadoon* is centered on a quest for meaning, set upon whimsical grounds. We can also find similarities between the narrative framework of the source material and Lerner and Burton Lane's musical *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1965). The largest proportion of narrative in both stories are framed as flashbacks—a retelling of what has already happened. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that not only did Lerner have the vision and the experience to adapt something of this nature, but that the audience would expect the resulting film to be representative of the Lerner and Loewe brand that had been so well established during the Golden Age of the Broadway and Hollywood musical.

In the summer of 1971, around the same time that the manuscript was completed, Tandet received a phone call from Lerner to let him know that Stanley Donen had been employed as the film's director.[20] Just as Lerner and Loewe, Donen had a string of box-office hits to precede him and he also approached *The Little Prince* with a strong vision as to how it should look. This was demonstrated in an interview he gave when promoting the film:

> Donen, aware of the responsibilities and pitfalls of such a presold story, has seen to it that the fable's magic and the "special qualities" that made it so enduringly popular, have been retained. "Nor have we forgotten the author's original dedication," says Donen. "If you remember, he dedicated the book to the child from whom a grown-up grew because "all grown-ups were once children—although few of them remember it!"[21]

Furthermore, *The Little Prince* came at a time during his career when he seemed to be experimenting with Lev's "Nobody Knows Anything" ethos. While Donen was known for some of the 1950s' greatest film musicals, during the 1960s and 1970s he, as Silverman describes, "exercised delightful creative stretches atypical of the mainstream,"[22] by producing two "side-splitting, cultish send-ups": *Bedazzled* (1967), a British comedy starring Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, and *Movie Movie* (1978), which was set up as a double feature, the first film concerning a boxer and the second a "backstage" musical comedy. Both were well received by audiences and critics, despite their "off-beat" nature. While in between these films he directed some box-office failures (including *Staircase*, 1968, and *Lucky Lady*, 1975), they all had one thing in common: Donen was stretching the boundaries of convention.

Donen appears to have approached *The Little Prince* in a similar way. He wanted "the picture to look different,"[23] said the film's cinematographer Christopher Challis, and this desire clashed directly with Lerner's ideas on how the film should be. The following section will evidence how Lerner's vision was rooted in Golden Age convention and influenced by stylistic qualities that he and Loewe had developed throughout their career, whereas Donen's vision was more reflective of the changing filmic sensibilities that at the time embraced cinematic realism.

## CREATIVE CONFLICT: GOLDEN AGE VALUES VERSUS CINEMATIC REALISM

An initial viewing of the film quickly reveals disparities between Golden Age values and cinematic realism. Firstly, *The Little Prince* is marketed as a family-film yet it possesses none of the charm, light-heartedness, or color that other fantastical family-film musicals of the decade had, such as *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971) and *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1971). Set in the Tunisian desert, the backdrop to the majority of the narrative is sparse with little to focus on but the Prince and Pilot—and this is at odds with Loewe's sweeping and melodious score. These stretches of film are broken up by flashbacks where the Little Prince recounts his journey. In these moments we are taken to "planets" inhabited by various figures: all gross caricatures of human characteristics. In one such scene the Little Prince visits a King (played by Joss Ackland) on a planet where countries have been divided by what looks like red tape, and small figurine houses are placed as towns across the revolving planet. During this scene Ackland sings "You're a Child," a typical Lerner and Loewe song where the lyrics are mainly spoken (it is impossible to watch this scene without being reminded of Rex Harrison's performance of "Why Can't the English?"). Throughout the song the camera angle seems to diminish the Prince, as the King looks down upon him in an intimidating manner (at one point even covering him with his robe). The result is that Lerner's humorous lyrics, such as "Continentally / You are mentally / A silly billy boy of two / How absurd of you / It's unheard of you / To never think as grown-ups do," come across as more aggressive than perhaps was intended. Lerner discusses this reinterpretation of the score, and his general dissatisfaction with Donen, in his autobiography:

> Loewe wrote the most beautiful score, filled with melody and bubbling with the innocence of youth. Alas, it never was heard on the screen as he had composed it. The director, someone named Stanley Donen, took it upon himself to change every tempo, delete musical phrases at will and distort the intention of every song until the entire score was unrecognizable. Unlike the theatre, where the author is the final authority, in motion pictures it is the director. And if one falls into the hands of some cinematic Bigfoot, one pays the price for someone else's ineptitude. In this case the price was high, because it undoubtedly was Fritz's last score.[24]

A study of the film's production history reveals that these disparities in style were the result of a creative conflict that plagued the project throughout. Tandet recalls that the relationship between director and writer broke down after Donen had made changes to Lerner's screenplay. Tandet explains that Lerner arrived in Tunisia a few weeks after principal photography had begun, and when he arrived on set he soon noticed that his script had been tampered with. Lerner was furious, and he threatened to shut down the production. Tandet claims to have acted as a sort of mediator between writer and director, until they both agreed to sit down and work on the script together, and Donen promised to make no more changes without Lerner's consent.[25] Through a comparison of two of Lerner's *Little Prince* screenplays (one, an early draft dated 1971,[26] and another, a shooting script, dated February 1972[27]), and the final edited film, alongside letters written by Lerner during the production, we are able to see exactly what the points of contention were and in which instances Donen overruled Lerner's decisions: casting, *mise-en-scène*, and the treatment of the Little Prince's death.

## Casting

The first page of both of Lerner's screenplays contain one centered paragraph: "It is safe to assume that the pilot's name is Antoine de Saint-Exupéry—hence 'A' being used to indicate his dialogue." When searching for an actor to play the role of The Pilot, or "A," Lerner looked for a leading man, someone who could carry the weight of the real-life aviator and author. As with the protagonists of his previous works, such as Rex Harrison in *My Fair Lady*, Richard Burton in *Camelot*, and Louis Jourdan in *Gigi*, Lerner envisioned a charismatic leading male to drive the narrative forward. This intention is made clear in both screenplays. In these, the phrase that is so often cited as the "essence" of the novel is given to the Pilot (and not the Fox, as in the novel): "It is only with the heart that one can see clearly. What is essential is invisible to the eye."[28]

By having the Pilot say these words, it becomes clear to the audience that the leading male has learned a lesson; he has developed as a character, thus helping to anchor the narrative toward a filmic convention that the audience can easily grasp. Lerner's first thought, when searching for his Pilot, was of Richard Burton. In August 1970 he contacted the actor and asked him if was interested, to which Burton replied: "Am fascinated and always have been by *Le Petit Prince* . . . and am more fascinated by your treatment of it. Will it take long to do? What form will it take and a myriad of other questions?"[29] Burton did not end up taking the role, possibly because in answer to his first question, the film would take too long (in the end from the start of principal photography to its final release the production of *The Little Prince* spanned over four years). Other actors reportedly approached were Nicol Williamson, Robert Goulet, Gene Hackman, and Richard Harris. It was rumored, however, that Frank Sinatra was the one Paramount really wanted. Tandet recounts the moment that Lerner told him of Sinatra's potential involvement:

> About two months ago, Sinatra, whose house in Palm Springs is next to Fritz Loewe's, walked into Fritz's living room and saw the score of *The Little Prince*, inside an album cover with Fritz's name on it. He opened the score. Fritz played a few of the numbers. He said he liked it and wanted to play the aviator. Fritz got all excited.[30]

This casting choice, however, was vetoed by Donen who two years after the film was released explained his reasoning: "The part calls for a man who must allow himself to be dominated by a six-year-old-boy. It's difficult for me to imagine Frank relating to a child in such a way. . . . I didn't want to risk the movie on him."[31] The Pilot they eventually found was Richard Kiley, better known for his roles on Broadway than on screen. This casting did not have the box-office power that a Hollywood star would have provided, but it is clear from Donen's subsequent edits of Lerner's script that he did not envisage the Pilot as being the narrative's driving force.

In September 1974, Lerner wrote to Donen after he had seen the latest edit of the film (before it was due to be released in November). In this letter he asks Donen to consider making some changes, one of which concerns the novel's most "famous" phrase:

> I wish you would reconsider that famous line being said by the Fox in the wheatfields. I know you have a cut of it with Kiley saying it himself and it really gives the line the importance it should have. It seems a little cutie-pie this way for so important a moment in the Pilot's character development.[32]

Donen ignored this suggestion and in the film (as it is in the book) the Fox says the words that provide the essence of the story's meaning: "It is only with the heart that one can see clearly. What is essential is invisible to the eye." Lerner's focus here was the character development of the Pilot, but Donen's final cut shows a complete disregard to Lerner's intentions and this opportune moment to adhere to filmic convention.

This conflict between Lerner's narrative and Donen's casting decisions is also demonstrated by the role of the Rose (the flower whom the Little Prince falls in love with). In Lerner's script he introduces the Rose: "THE FLOWER metamorphosizes before our eyes into a beautiful young girl of indeterminate age."[33] Later, in the same scene, Lerner refers to the Rose as a "little girl." This description is at odds with the subsequent casting, as effectively summed up by Lerner in a letter to his agent Irving Lazar:

> As a reflection of Donen's exalted view of love, women and mankind, the role is played by a hooker and sung and danced in a manner that can only be described as a cross between Carrie Fernell and Ann Corio. I'm not certain how Bob [Fosse] feels about it, but I *know* Frank Yablans is as revolted as Joe Tandet, Fritz and I are, and we are trying to set up a meeting with him in New York to see what can be done. Donen refuses to change it.[34]

While viewed as an "abomination," it would seem that Donna McKechnie (who played the Rose) had played the role as directed. Tandet recounts a discussion he had with McKechnie about her performance:

> One Sunday I managed to take pretty, sweet, talented Donna out on a date. Over brunch, she expressed her shock at a direction Stanley had given her about how she should render her song and dance. "Now you must never repeat this, Joey. Promise?" "Absolutely" I'd promise anything to hear this. "Stanley told me to do the dance for Steven as if I were demonstrating to him that if he left he'd be leaving the greatest f*** he'd ever had."[35]

Of course, there is no way of knowing if Donen had said these words, but the resulting scene is one that appears to be quite pointed in its intention. Heavily made up and superimposed onto the Rose, McKechnie moves seductively as a husky voice berates the Little Prince for not thinking of her needs while admiring her own beauty.[36] This manipulative manner is emphasized by the Prince's portrayal of complete innocence. Based on his description of the Rose, we could assume that what Lerner found "abominable" was the overt sexuality of the Rose. And indeed, it is this moment that seems off-kilter for what is deemed to be (and marketed as) a family film.

## *Mise-en-Scène*

As well as rewrites such as the above, Donen and Lerner also had different ideas when it came to the setting of the film. Donen set the film in the Tunisian desert, filling the screen with beige sand, blue sky, and two figures (one of whose costume matches the hues of the desert) for much of the film's running time. These scenes lack color and contrast, the only relief being the Little Prince's vivid green and red jacket. This lack of variation is emphasized by wide-angle shots where the camera pans round to depict the isolation of the Pilot and Prince.

While this setting remains true to the novel, in Lerner's original screenplays he attempted to add more color and variation by scripting hallucinations. These happen twice (in both screenplays), once when the Pilot first crashes into the desert: "*Sand and sky blend in the distance into a Turneresque* painting of *undulating light. Figures seem to be darting in and out of the fusion of color. Voices seem to be singing snatches of shapeless melodies. For a second or two, the sketchy outline of Paris appears.*" [37]; and later when he and the Prince are suffering from dehydration: "*Again he sees a horizon painted with mirages, as in the beginning. This time, however, all the mirages involve water—a misty waterfall with figures darting in and out of the falls—rain falling—huge waves crashing on a beach, etc.*"[38]

These moments would have interspersed the longest stretches of the shots in the desert and would also have provided an opportunity for the kind of color and richness seen in Lerner's previous works. These hallucinations, however, did not appear in the final edit of the film, and we are therefore left with a setting most succinctly described by Challis: "when we finished it, it looked as though it had been shot in a gravel pit."[39] The setting is particularly jarring when combined with Loewe's romantic score—the two, stylistically, are working against each other.

Lerner's draft screenplays also appear to place more emphasis on the inclusion of Saint-Exupéry's original drawings, with many of the episodic sequences beginning as animations before "metamorphosing" into reality. Take, for example, Lerner's description of the Little Prince's meeting with the Fox in the rose garden. It begins when "The Pilot's hand is seen drawing a rose garden. His hand fairly flies across the paper. The Little Prince, at first animated and then becoming real, strolls into the picture. He sees the roses and stands aghast." As he sits down, "almost as if in a state of shock," the Little Prince realizes that his Rose is not unique at all. He then hears a voice (the Fox), looks up and as Lerner describes: "sees the Fox's head peering at him from behind a tree. The Fox, at first animated, metamorphosizes into a person."[40]

This scene as featured in the film is quite different. Firstly, at no point is there any animation. The Pilot makes a rough drawing of a rose garden, which then gradually disappears as the drawing is broken up with images of a real rose garden. The Little Prince strolls into the scene, unanimated. Behind a tree there appears a real fox, which is interspersed with shots of a man (Gene Wilder) suggesting that he is the Fox. There are no animations and there is no metamorphosis. Lerner described similar effects for the Snake and all of the characters whom the Little Prince meets on the other planets. And yet, again, for these scenes there are no animations and no metamorphosis. The animations that Lerner had intended would have added a lightness to the film. Furthermore, it would have provided an opportunity for more of Saint-Exupéry's own illustrations to be featured, which may have provided the consistency in style that critics felt was lacking.

## Dealing with Death

The final point of contention concerns the final scene of the film. At the end of Saint-Exupéry's novella the Little Prince realizes that he needs to get back to his Rose, and the Snake can provide him with a "sting" to transport him there. When the Pilot learns of this intention, the Prince consoles him by saying: "When you look up at the sky at night, since I'll be living on one of them, since I'll be laughing on one of them, for you it'll be as if all the stars are laughing. You'll have stars that can laugh!" The Pilot then escorts the Prince to the wall where he shall meet the Snake:

> "Here's the place. Let me go on alone." And he sat down because he was frightened. Then he said: "You know . . . my flower . . . I'm responsible for her. And she's so weak! And so naïve. She has four ridiculous thorns to defend her against the world. . . ." I sat down, too, because I was unable to stand any longer. He said, "There. . . . That's all. . . ." He hesitated a little longer, then he stood up. He took a step. I couldn't move. There was nothing but a yellow flash close to his ankle. He remained motionless for an instant. He didn't cry out. He fell gently, the way a tree falls. There wasn't even a sound, because of the sand.[41]

The Little Prince made the ultimate choice available to us as living beings, the decision to die. There would be no easy way to transfer such a concept to screen, but Lerner had found a way to soften the finality of what was effectively suicide. The scene takes place the morning after the Little Prince was bitten, and the Pilot wakes up to find that the prince has gone. Running out to the dune he shouts: "Come back! Where are you. . . . Come back!" What follows is a series of mirages, "*In the distance he sees the Little Prince standing and waving to him*," which increases the desperation of his frantic search, "*the closer he comes to the Little Prince, the more the Little Prince fades. A mirage!*" He then sees a mirage of "*several Little Princes in different corners of the horizon.*" He continues to run toward them, his hysteria increasing as each one disappears, until eventually he stops and looks around: "*The horizon is an endless, intertwining cluster—like a large mural—of all the sketches that he drew. On the horizon he sees in the sketch form of his drawings—the snake on the wall and the Little Prince.*"[42] By filling the screen with mirages of both the Prince and the sketches drawn by the Pilot, Lerner dilutes the visual impact of the tragedy by encouraging the audience to wonder whether the Little Prince was ever real, or was always just a mirage. In the film, however, there are no mirages and no sketches. When the Pilot wakes up the following morning, he chases the horizon searching for the Prince to no avail, before falling to the ground in grief. The emptiness of the desert reflects his heartbreak. This means that our final viewing of the Prince is his lifeless body. His final words, "You'll have stars that can laugh" are brought into action as the Pilot flies toward the sky to the sound of the Prince's laughter.

Donen's ending feels less resolved than Lerner's. We are left with a very "real" image of a child dying, which seems at odds with the fantastical events leading up to it. Lerner's ending maintains the sense of whimsy by resurrecting the Prince more clearly as a figment of the Pilot's imagination. Instead, the result is much darker and again leads us to question whether or not this really is a family film. In the final cut of this scene, once again the music contradicts the setting. As Kiley sings the sonorous melody to the still body of the Prince, rich orchestrations provide his musical setting; meanwhile, the pilot's sense of isolation in the desert and overwhelming grief is strengthened by the sparse and minimal setting onscreen. As Kiley reaches the climax of the song he holds the lifeless Prince in his arms. This image of the dying prince offsets the non-diegetic music, and the two work against each other so as to allow the tragedy of the situation to seep through.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

The film was released in December 1974 in time to be marketed as a feature for the festive season: "The Little Prince is the best news for the coming holiday season!"[43] wrote one such advertisement. In this same poster featured in the *New York Times* the words of Canby are proudly displayed: "THE SCORE OF 'THE LITTLE PRINCE' IS A SHEER DELIGHT . . . a throwback to a Broadway idiom that Lerner and Loewe still know best, and the team is still writing in that style—melodic, romantic and witty." Underneath is a quote from Walter Spencer: "The director is Stanley Donen, the guy who bought us some of the best musicals ever made," and across from that, Jay Cocks: "Donen is a director of sophistication and invention whose entertainments are object lessons in how to craft the kind of movies they are not supposed to be making any more."

These supposedly ringing endorsements do not paint the whole picture, quite literally. Canby's words belong to a scathing review of the film and are pieced together so as to give the illusion of an endorsement. What Canby *actually* said was that the score is the only thing deserved of attention, that the film itself was "blank" and "boring," and that he wished "Lerner and Loewe and Donen had tackled some other subject and left this not really modern fairy tale to the Disney organization, which would probably know better than to touch it."[44] Like Canby, other critics were let down by what was such a promising collaboration: David Robinson felt that the premise of the film did nothing to exemplify the talents of those involved: "With never more than two characters on screen at once, this quiet, intimate musical is a long way from either Lerner-Loewe collaborations (*Brigadoon, My Fair Lady, Paint Your Wagon*) or from the Donen of *On the Town, Singin' in the Rain* or *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers.*"[45] This sentiment was echoed in a review by Dale Winogura for *Cinefantastique*: he remarked that "the songs of Alan Jay Lerner and the score of his collaborator Frederick Loewe [are incidental] at best . . . seeming to be uninspired derivations of their masterful work in MY FAIR LADY and CAMELOT . . . THE LITTLE PRINCE is not bad, but for Stanley Donen, it's an inescapable failure."[46] There is common theme of "disappointment" in these reviews of *The Little Prince.* The film had failed to live up to expectations set by the creators' previous works. This idea is supported by Canby's review headlined "The Little Prince Is an Important Disappointment":

> Sometime ago, while writing about "That's Entertainment," I inclined to the idea that film musicals had become an all but lost art form because of economics and a lack of contemporary talent to compare with people like Dietz and Schwartz, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern and the others who were responsible for the great M-G-M films of the forties and fifties. "The Little Prince" shows us that economics need not be as an important barrier and that, indeed, the talent is still around. However, the talent seem to get sidetracked on the wrong project.[47]

Canby is yearning for a return of the "great M-G-M films of the forties and fifties." He believes that Lerner, Loewe, and Donen chose the wrong project in *The Little Prince*, and that is to blame for its failure. What he does not acknowledge is how audiences have changed since the 1940s and 1950s, thus his nostalgia for the Golden Age is influencing his reception of a contemporary film. The very names of Lerner, Loewe, and Donen would promise a return to this era, and yet for the reasons explained in this chapter, the result was something quite different. Canby's disappointment is more with the film's inability to reawaken a "lost artform" than any aesthetic value judgment.

## Beyond the Reviews

While the final outcome was disappointing, there are moments in the film where the juxtaposing styles do work together in an effective interpretation of Saint-Exupéry's text. When discussing adaptation in *Concepts in Film Theory*, Dudley Andrew writes (as an extension of Andre Bazin metaphor for adaptation[48]):

> the original artwork can be likened to a crystal chandelier whose formal beauty is a product of its intricate but fully artificial arrangement of parts whilst the cinema

> would be a crude flashlight interesting not for its own shape or the quality of its light but for what it makes appear in this or that dark corner.[49]

This metaphor implies that the purpose of an adaptation is to elucidate some aspect of the original text; it is not a work of art in its own right (merely a crude flashlight), but it is capable of illuminating that which otherwise may not have been seen.

Through a study of *The Little Prince*'s production and reception, we have so far discovered how Lerner and Donen's conflicting visions created an incoherent style that was disappointing to critics. This section of the chapter will provide a different approach: a textual analysis of two scenes and their song moments in relation to the "original artwork." This will demonstrate the ways in which Lerner and Loewe's idealism (routed in Golden Age convention) worked with Donen's realism (a symptom of shifting trends), to realize an effective postmodernist interpretation of Saint-Exupéry's text. *The Little Prince* might not have the "shape" or "quality" to be a "good" film (with all the subjective ideals that may entail), but its postmodernist form makes it a valuable contribution to *The Little Prince* (novel) and its reception history, by helping to both reveal and emphasize some of its meaning for a contemporary audience.

When the Little Prince lands on Earth the first creature he meets is the Snake, "a funny creature . . . no thicker than a finger."[50] The Snake is very powerful: "Anyone I touch, I send back to the land from which he came." This ominous proposal is followed by the Snake's acknowledgment that the Prince is different from "anyone," he is "innocent" and "came from a star." He tells the Prince that should he ever get homesick, he can "help." In the film, he sings this proposition to the Prince to the musical setting of a tango, as if tempting the Prince to commit this ultimate sin. Donen cast Bob Fosse as the Snake and gave him the freedom to direct and choreograph the scene. 'What a child might make of this scene I can't imagine' writes Canby. 'Mr. Fosse, dressed like a 19th century Chicago pimp, dances around the Sahara in those marvellously eccentric movements that look great when done by Gwen Verdon but embarrassing in this context."[51] A review of the film featured in *The Village Voice*, tells us what a child *did* think of it: "Bob Fosse, the snake, was terrific in movement and ssssss sounds. . . . He's like the villain of the film and he's right for that part," wrote Alexandra Sheedy, twelve years old.[52]

On the same page as Sheedy's review is an advert for *Lenny* (1974), a film directed by Fosse. At the time of his role in *The Little Prince*, Fosse was well known as both a director and choreographer. He had received multiple Tony Awards for choreography (*Sweet Charity, Pippin*) and an Academy Award for Best Director (*Cabaret*). In *Bob Fosse's Jazz Revolution*, Cheryl Mrozowski notes that Fosse's "style was so distinctive that it could be indisputably identified at a glance. The forward thrust of the hips, the hunched shoulders, the gloved hands, and the turned-in feet were all hallmarks of the Fosse musical."[53] His style was "reminiscent of everyday movement" and bought an original sense of realism to his films and musicals. Around the time of his role as the Snake, Fosse's work had a similar theme: life in and around nightclubs. With choreographed sequences representing the "sensual and erotic,"[54] and narratives rich with decadence and debauchery he chose projects that "appealed to his unsentimental attitude toward life." It seems appropriate therefore that the Snake of our story is personified by a man who is known for depicting themes of a darker, seductive nature.

When watching the scene it is clear that Fosse's star persona is as much a part of the routine as Saint-Exupéry's Snake. For example, as Kevin Winkler notes, "The number includes a witty interlude during which the snake sprinkles a handful of sand on the desert floor for a soft-shoe routine that is pure Fosse."[55] The film is acknowledging Fosse the star and, in doing so, impacting reception and interpretation with outer contextual influences. Fosse represents a tempting, and ultimately destructive lifestyle which would offer an escape from "this inhuman race." The Snake's lyric echoes this meaning: "If you would like to cure the fever called life; / Get some relief from all the struggle and strife; / The grandest medicine that I can propose / Is under your nose." The impact of these words made greater via an acknowledgment of the audience's reality through the figure of the "star" Fosse. It is difficult to ignore the implications behind the phrase "the grandest medicine that I can propose / Is under your nose," especially when we take in to account the prevalent use of amphetamines in the arts industry at the time of the film's production.[56]

The dark connotations of this scene are made lighter by what it precedes: Gene Wilder's performance as the Fox. This scene is a rare moment in the film where music, script, and setting work harmoniously in its reimagining of Saint-Exupéry's original text. The Little Prince's time with the Fox teaches him an important lesson. Upon arriving in a rose garden, the Prince is heartbroken to find "five thousand of them, all just alike, in just one garden." He thought he was "rich" because he had "just one flower," and is devastated to find that she is just "an ordinary rose." It is then that he meets the Fox, who asks to be tamed: "If you want a friend, tame me!" The Prince then spends time with the Fox and slowly they build a relationship. Eventually, he has to leave and when he does the Fox tells him to "Go look at the roses again. You'll understand that yours is the only rose in the world." And he does. He realizes that it is the time we spend with someone that makes them so unique and special to us. "People have forgotten this truth," the Fox said. "But you musn't forget it. You become responsible forever for what you've tamed. You're responsible for your rose."[57]

Donen's direction of this scene, alongside Lerner and Loewe's music and lyric, illuminates and emphasizes the friendship the Prince has built with the Fox. The taming process (or the building of the relationship) happens during the song "Closer and Closer." The song begins with the Fox instructing the Prince on how to "tame him": "We'll go a glance at a time, A small advance at a time. We'll be afraid a bit And shy a bit, Avoid each other's eye a bit Less often each day. The ice'll soften each day, As we get closer and closer and closer." This opening passage is played rubato, which mirrors the tentative but encouraging steps the Fox takes toward the Prince. What follows is a dance break in which the Prince and Fox dance together in joyful choreography. The song ends as they sing the chorus together, having cemented their friendship.

During this scene Donen uses a fish-eye lens sporadically, a feature that is also used when the Prince visits other planets. The effect is a change in perspective: at times we are mere onlookers to the action and at other times we are forced to look up at the events on screen as the Little Prince might. This mirrors the opening scene in the film where the narrator (as a child) is forced to look up at his critics (the grown-ups). During these moments the audience briefly becomes a participant as we see the onscreen action from the point of view of an onscreen character. Another interesting feature of this scene is the portrayal of the Fox by Gene Wilder. While his character is not animated (as Lerner had wished), his comedic style and movement adds an animated quality. Wide-eyed with abrupt movement, Wilder runs in and out of the camera view as an animated fox might. This performance is both humorous and effective. Thus, this scene is demonstrative of the motifs that Hoeveler outlined as being typical of America's "postmodernist" turn: the "blurring of distinctions," and "the mixing of forms." The audience is continuously asked to change their viewpoint, blurring the distinction between "onlooker" and "participant." Furthermore, the animated quality of Wilder's performance provides a subtle, and sophisticated, mixing of forms.

## Conclusion

"What you want from a director, is a sort of loving dictator," said Donen. He goes on, "Art can't be a group effort, it can't be. It's got to come from a single point of view. The joke is what is a camel? A horse designed by a committee. Two people directing is hell."[58] Donen's view on directing, while not discussed in the context of *The Little Prince*, is key to the tensions that plagued the production of the film. Donen's "single point of view" conflicted with Lerner's own ideas of how the film should be. Donen wanted "something different," whereas Lerner did not. As an analysis of his draft screenplays demonstrate, Lerner's vision for the film was much more in keeping with his own established style. The result was something that did not fit comfortably in either camp: a collision of Golden Age values and cinematic realism, and this was symptomatic of the decade's "postmodernist turn."

This scholarship could be taken further. *The Little Prince* is more than just the failure that it is purported to be. For example, it seems strange that the score has received such little attention. This is the final collaboration of Lerner and Loewe and it is the only score for which there is a recording of it as performed by the writer and composer themselves.[59] More could also be said about the merging of their idealist musical aesthetic with more contemporary, realist settings. For example, how this transference works on the Broadway stage when productions embrace more contemporary values but the music remains largely unchanged. There is also much interest to be found in the performances of well-established Broadway stars Richard Kiley and Donna McKechnie, who other than in *The Little Prince* have never been seen on the film musical screen. With a foundation of context provided for the film, we can approach it in ways that go beyond its failings at the box office. In doing so we may discover that there are many moments, features, and histories that are noteworthy and deserving of attention.

### Notes

1. Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 44.
2. J. David Hoeveler, *The Postmodernist Turn: American Thought and Culture in the 1970s* (New York: Twayne Publishers; London: Prentice Hall International, 1996).

3. Hoeveler, *The Postmodernist Turn*, xiv.
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36. In her autobiography McKechnie writes about the experience and her frustrations with the final outcome of the movie: "When I saw the movie months later, I was mortified. My scene had been cut to ribbons and the music was changed completely. The song I sang, 'Be Happy,' was in my soprano voice, but my voice in the scene was dubbed by someone with a very low, sultry English accent. It occurred to me that he never had any intention to use my speaking voice." Donna McKechnie, *Time Steps: My Musical Comedy Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).
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## CHAPTER 22

# *YENTL*, BARBRA STREISAND, AND MUSIC OF THE MIND

### PAUL R. LAIRD

In staged and film musicals, songs are usually delivered as performances. A character, for example, provides an emotional response to a question, such as a declaration of love. The resulting song enhances the answer. Two characters might sing during the demonstration of an action or skill to another who requires a lesson. Someone returns from a trip and tells their community about it in song. Such performances are the essence of the musical theater and its cinematic counterpart, and the audience craves such presentational elements. *Yentl* (United Artists, 1983), based on the short story "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" by Isaac Bashevis Singer, is a musical film where the majority of the songs present the title character's inner thoughts, explaining the motives of a female disguised as a male. Barbra Streisand produced and directed the film, co-wrote the script with Jack Rosenthal, played the title role, and sang all of the songs, an unusual concentration of responsibilities in one person. She did not intend *Yentl* as a musical, but had such trouble securing studio backing for the project that she found herself required to use the most famous arrow in her quiver of talents. Her friends the lyricists Marilyn and Alan Bergman convinced Streisand to make *Yentl* into a musical as a way for the character to explain and express herself. Michel Legrand, another friend, wrote the music. Streisand contributed song ideas and listened as they wrote the score, which won an Academy Award and became well known from its successful soundtrack album. *Yentl* is an unusual musical, made possible by the star's fame and title character's strong beliefs: her obsession with studying the Torah; her outrage over the treatment of women; and her love for her father, study partner Avigdor, and Hadass, the woman that Avigdor also loves.

## MAKING THE FILM

Streisand read Singer's short story in 1968 and decided that she must adapt it into a film. The tale's first four words—"After her father's death . . ."[1]—spoke volumes to a woman who lost her own father when she was fifteen months old. Raised Jewish, Streisand is not observant but identifies strongly with her cultural background. As Linda Pohly has noted, Streisand is comfortable with her Jewishness, which "she flaunted . . . through her looks, her name, her style, and her choice of material."[2] Yentl's love for learning reminded Streisand of her father, a scholar and teacher who died of a cerebral hemorrhage at thirty-five. She admitted: "See, all these years I was just looking for a daddy in a way, and then I realized I was never going to get him. It was only through *Yentl* that I had a chance to make a father."[3] The one in her film, played by Nehemiah Persoff, is loving and offers his daughter forbidden Torah study. He dies suddenly; Yentl leaves home dressed in his clothing and seeks training at a yeshiva.

As is often the case with a project featuring Barbra Streisand, *Yentl* sparked controversy. The most notable aspects of the story of its creation are Streisand's devotion to it and the difficulties that she faced. She acquired the film rights from Singer in 1968. Her agent at the time, Freddie Fields, did not want her to do another ethnic project so soon after portraying Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl* (Columbia, 1968). She approached Czech director Ivan Passer about *Yentl*. He presented objections: Streisand was too old at twenty-seven to play Singer's teenaged girl, perhaps she was too famous for the project, and there were few successful Hollywood films with a woman disguised as a man.[4] She dropped the idea, but in the mid-1970s a play of *Yentl*, with script by Leah Napolin and Singer, starring Tovah Feldshuh, ran successfully in New York, reinvigorating Streisand's interest. She could not find an interested studio. Even First Artists, with whom she was under contract and wanted a film from her, passed on *Yentl*. With her current romantic partner, Jon Peters, Streisand purchased the rights for the film back from First Artists. Peters tried to dissuade her from doing it and to accept other lucrative offers, apparently one of the differences that severed their relationship in early 1980.[5] Orion Pictures agreed to do the film in September 1980, but canceled it in the industry-wide retrenchment caused by the debacle of *Heaven's Gate* (United Artists) later that fall.[6] When two of her former agents, David Begelman and Freddie Fields, took over United Artists, Streisand finally found her studio, as long as the film were a musical.[7] They worked out a $14.5 million budget, but it was not a generous contract for Streisand and it gave the studio intrusive power over several stages of making the film.[8]

The cast included Mandy Patinkin as Avigdor, the yeshiva study partner with whom Yentl falls in love while disguised as Anshel, and Amy Irving as Hadass, the young woman who is engaged to Avigdor but marries Anshel. Filming occurred in London and three places in Czechoslovakia between April and October 1982, a strenuous period for Streisand given her multiple roles in making the film. Along with those who assisted with the production, she watched the bottom line, but they went over budget by $1.5 million, compelling Streisand to forfeit about half of what she had been paid to star in the film. She ran into more personal costs when it took her longer to dub it than had been scheduled. When *Yentl* was completed, she asked her friend Steven Spielberg for a critique; he told her not to change a frame.[9] The film's premiere took place on December 9, 1983. The public confirmed Streisand's strong belief in the project: *Yentl* grossed $100 million worldwide and the singer earned $6 million in royalties from the soundtrack.[10] In Hollywood's annual awards the reception of *Yentl* was uneven. From the Golden Globes, Streisand won the Best Director award and the film won Best Motion Picture–Comedy or Musical, but for the Academy Awards there were only five nominations: Amy Irving for Best Actress in a Supporting Role, Best Art Direction–Set Decoration, and three for aspects of the music. The film's only Oscar went to Michel Legrand and the Bergmans for Best Music, Original Song Score, and Its Adaptation or Best Adaptation Score. That *Yentl* was not nominated for Best Picture nor Streisand for anything seemed a snub from the Academy for Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and was widely reported as such in the press.[11]

Streisand studied Judaism and theology in preparation for *Yentl*. Her son Jason Gould (son of Elliott Gould, Streisand's husband from 1963 to 1971) had his bar mitzvah in early 1980 and she took part in his preparations. She also consulted with Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis, attended Hasidic weddings, and asked questions of author Chaim Potok and others.[12] This research shows up in the film during theological discussions, which occur more than in Singer's story or in the play. Both story and play include rich descriptions and depictions of Orthodox life but little of what might be discussed in a yeshiva. (Commentary on the depiction of Jewish life and ethnicity in the film has been richly considered by previous authors and goes beyond the scope of this study.[13]) Streisand's deep feminist beliefs were also a factor, the existence of which probably encouraged her to emphasize the title character's support for women and their issues in the film.[14] Streisand called out her religion for its entrenched perspectives about women. In the film, Yentl defends women to males in the yeshiva, questions the lack of opportunity for women to study the Torah in the song "Where Is It Written," and notes in "No Wonder" the way that Hadass caters to Avigdor. Yentl's resentment on the treatment of women also appears in the short story and play.

## The Short Story

Isaac Bashevis Singer (1902-1991) wrote "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" in the 1950s. As was his wont, Singer wrote it in Yiddish and made it about Orthodox Jews. The title character is transgender, describing herself as possessing "the soul of a man and the body of a woman."[15] Her father comments on her masculine soul; she asks why she was born a woman. He responds: "Even Heaven makes mistakes." In disguising herself as a man, Yentl knows that she lives in sin.[16] Singer quotes the commandment: "A woman shall not wear that which pertaineth to a man." Studying at the yeshiva as Anshel, she violates more strictures, such as allowing men to touch her when she is ritually unclean and spending time alone with Avigdor. Yentl knows the rules, but, as Singer states: "her soul thirsted to study Torah." In the original Yiddish, Singer used the masculine pronoun when referring to Yentl, not seen in English translations.[17] Small wonder that Yentl has become a hero to the transgender community.[18] The following synopsis of the short story later will help us note how the play differed. Streisand actually adapted the play; finally, we can appreciate the derivation of the movie plot and the changes made by Streisand and Jack Rosenthal, who collaborated with her on the screenplay.

Singer begins with the death of Yentl's father, a bedridden rabbi who taught his daughter from the Talmud with the doors locked and windows covered. When he was asleep, Yentl tried on his clothing and noted in the mirror that she might pass for a man by cutting her hair and leaving sidelocks. After her father's death she refuses overtures from marriage brokers, sells the house and furniture, and by night makes her transition and leaves her village. She comes to an inn filled with male students. Yentl uses the name of an uncle, Anshel,[19] and meets Avigdor, who convinces her to study at his yeshiva in Bechev, a town that supports students with places to stay and meals at homes. Anshel asks Avigdor why he is not married. He reports that he was engaged to a woman named Hadass but her father tore up the marriage contract; Avigdor provides no reason. Anshel coincidentally receives dinner on Tuesday nights at the home of Alter Vishkower, Hadass's father. Avigdor and Anshel become study partners and friends, but Anshel refuses to share housing with him or accept his instruction in swimming. Avigdor keeps asking about Hadass, who serves Anshel dinner on Tuesdays, and suggests that his friend should marry her. Avigdor becomes engaged with the widow Peshe. Avigdor's future father-in-law is Hasidic and insists that Avigdor should study at one of the sect's prayer houses, separating Yentl from the man that she loves. She is unable to choose another study partner. She learns from Hadass that her father broke the engagement to Avigdor because one of his brothers had committed suicide. Hadass still loves Avigdor but asks Anshel not to tell him. Yentl finds herself having dreams where she wears both men's and women's clothing and now understands the reason for the commandment that she breaks: her soul has become "perplexed."[20]

At another Tuesday dinner, following Avigdor's insistence that the two should marry, Yentl expresses interest in Hadass. She wants to "exact vengeance for Avigdor" and believes that she could fool the naive Hadass for a period of time and stay close to Avigdor. She cannot sleep that night, wondering if she has "sealed a pact with Satan," but when Anshel happens to meet Alter Vishkower the next morning, they discuss marriage and soon they set a date. Avigdor comes to the yeshiva to congratulate his friend. They go for a long walk where Avigdor confirms that his brother killed himself. They vow eternal friendship and resolve to study together twice each day after their marriages. Anshel has problems while a tailor fits her for a man's wedding suit and considers fleeing, but she cannot. Avigdor marries Peshe, a union that immediately goes sour because she wants help in the shop, not to be supporting a scholar. In their discussions, Anshel disparages

Peshe and praises Avigdor, mischievously suggesting that "she" would value Avigdor as a husband if "she" were female.

Anshel marries Hadass in a celebration that Singer richly describes. Nosy women are pleased the next morning when they find blood in the bed, evidence that Anshel broke Hadass's hymen. Peshe refuses to support Avigdor and he starts to eat at the home of his friend and former fiancée. Hadass falls deeply in love with Anshel and townsfolk gossip about Anshel's refusal to go to the baths; eventually it becomes impossible for Yentl to sustain her ruse. Before Passover, Anshel travels to nearby Lublin with Avigdor. His friend promises to reveal a big secret, which she does at the inn. Anshel undresses for Avigdor when he refuses to believe that she is a woman. Once she has dressed again, Avigdor can again converse with Yentl. He loves her and is willing to forsake Hadass, whom Yentl wants him to marry after divorcing Peshe. Yentl refuses to marry Avigdor; she is not meant to be a wife. They will miss each other, but Yentl wishes to remain Anshel and find another yeshiva. They decide that she will send Hadass divorce papers through a messenger. When the notice arrives, Hadass becomes deathly ill. Avigdor returns after Passover and does not divulge the secret, except he has a conversation with Alter Vishkower that Singer leaves undescribed. Peshe divorces Avigdor, who marries Hadass. They name their firstborn, a son, Anshel.

## THE PLAY

The play *Yentl* opened at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre on October 23, 1975, after first being produced at the Chelsea Theater Center in Brooklyn. The director was Robert Kalfin, with Tovah Feldshuh playing Yentl, John V. Shea as Avigdor, and Lynn Ann Leveridge as Hadass. Napolin wrote a draft of the play and then consulted with Singer, who added a number of details of shtetl life.[21] When the play reached Broadway, Singer demanded to be listed as coauthor.[22] Napolin and Singer made numerous changes in the plot but nothing that alters the story's general arc. In Act I, Scene 1, a matchmaker visits Yentl and her father with a potential husband, Lemmel, clearly too dimwitted for the brilliant young woman. The scene's dialogue allows Yentl to demonstrate her unorthodox thinking: she wants a man to bear her children and darn her socks and believes that the Torah was given by God to all Jews, including women.[23] In the next scene at her father's funeral, Yentl scandalously insists on saying Kaddish and resents that she does not count for the *minyan* when a male fool does. She gives a man a coin, bitterly noting that a woman may give alms.[24] The play includes frank treatment of sex and nudity, such as in Scene 6 where Avigdor goes swimming but Anshel refuses to join him. Avigdor returns nude and tells Anshel of his interest in sex and that he occasionally peers through loose boards into the women's bathhouse. He runs off to watch women bathe in the river. Yentl tells the audience that he came back to tell her about Peshe's body.[25] Scene 10 is Avigdor's engagement party; he brings refreshments to the yeshiva. In the short story at this point, Yentl chokes on brandy, a scene that in the play expands into her getting roaring drunk.

She creates a scandal dancing in a shawl, kissing Avigdor on the mouth, and passing out. She later wakes up, confusing everyone by talking about "Yentl."[26] Napolin and Singer supplied additional dramatic scenes that the play needed, such as Peshe publicly shaming Avigdor in Act II, Scene 4,[27] and in Act II, Scene 5, Hadass telling her husband about the gossip being spread about Anshel.[28] The end of the play is more definitive than the short story: Avigdor goes to the Vishkower's house, and whatever transpires inside sends Hadass screaming into the street.[29] Later, when she calls for him, he confirms that her husband was a woman and that Yentl loved both of them.[30] The film's plot is closer to the play than the short story.

## THE FILM'S PLOT

Streisand and Rosenthal retained many of the essentials of Singer's story and the play.[31] Hoffman, however, describes a crucial difference between the film and Singer's version: "Whereas Streisand's Yentl is a heterosexual feminist, Singer's Yentl is an androgynous figure who defies any single gender or sexual category."[32] The film, like the play, begins with Yentl's father alive. Streisand established a loving relationship between the characters. At one point he speaks of her brother Anshel, who died when Yentl was young, and his pride in his daughter. (In a deleted scene, he warns her about dressing in his clothing because her soul might become "perplexed" and in another the audience would have seen Yentl's distaste for marriage in discussion with a matchmaker and her father's concern over her reluctance. These were resonances of earlier versions of the story.[33]) When Yentl's father dies, she cuts her hair, dresses in her father's clothing, and leaves town. (Streisand as Anshel, like other men in the film, does not wear Orthodox sidelocks.) Anshel travels with Avigdor from the inn where they meet to Bechev. After an awkward night in Avigdor's bed, Anshel impresses the yeshiva's rabbi and becomes Avigdor's study partner. They live in separate rooms in the same house and become fast friends who engage in passionate debates. While Streisand does not overwhelm the film with Talmudic discussion, the viewer comes to appreciate that which Yentl loves.

There are strange moments for Avigdor and Anshel because she falls in love with him and this person attracts Avigdor in a way he cannot understand. Anshel avoids swimming with Avigdor and gets an eyeful that excites her when he returns from the river. Avigdor is engaged to Hadass, a woman that he stares at longingly whenever he is near her. He mourns for his brother, but is evasive about what killed him, telling Anshel that it was pneumonia, but he told Hadass's father it was consumption. About halfway through the film, Avigdor's future father-in-law learns that the brother's death was a suicide and ends the engagement. Hadass's parents become interested in Anshel as a mate for Hadass. The possibility excites Avigdor, who selfishly notes that he could keep seeing Hadass and perhaps later a marriage between Hadass and Anshel might be dissolved and he could become her husband. Yentl wants no part of the scheme but relents when Avigdor starts to leave Bechev. Anshel has an awkward fitting for a wedding garment and marries Hadass, all the while musing in song about the situation, her feelings for these two people, and how easily people can be fooled. She makes it through the wedding night by telling Hadass that they cannot consummate their relationship while Hadass still loves Avigdor; she pours red wine in the bed to fake a bloodstain. The two women become tipsy and engage in a loud pillow fight, bewildering Hadass's parents. Another time, after Hadass begs Anshel to "teach" her—meaning make love to her—Anshel diverts this into instructing her about the Talmud. Anshel's kindness causes Hadass to fall deeply in love with her and she attempts a seduction, necessitating an end to the charade.

After a touching farewell with Hadass, Anshel makes the trip to Lublin with Avigdor and reveals her gender. Avigdor is furious and shoves Yentl around, relenting when she admits that she loves him. He realizes that he also loves her, kisses her, but abruptly ends it, thinking of Hadass. Avigdor suggests that they go somewhere and marry and cannot understand why Yentl is reluctant and still wants to study. They resolve the situation by Yentl writing notes to the rabbi and Hadass, both delivered by Avigdor. The film concludes with Yentl's letter to the couple, now married, and her final song on a ship, probably bound for America with her independence and feminism intact. Pesche appears in the film behind a bakery counter, and in one outtake Avigdor is portrayed in some kind of relationship with her, but the film allows no time for Avigdor's other partner.[34] The three principals are a close-knit trio, each in love with the other two. Streisand dedicated the film to her father, ". . . and to all our fathers."

Singer wrote a screenplay that Streisand rejected. There were perhaps eight drafts, but ultimately Streisand wrote her own with Rosenthal.[35] Singer expressed his disdain for the film in a review.[36] He states that the project lacked "artistic merit," preferring Feldshuh in the role. Singer believes that Streisand spoke to too many rabbis and should have hired another director. He dislikes the script's Talmudic references. Singer admits that he knows little about music, but he hears nothing in the songs that reminds him of the yeshivas around which the story was based and believes the songs "drowned the action." He does not consider his story "material for a musical, certainly not the kind Miss Streisand has given us." He thinks that Streisand was too large of a presence in the movie. Singer cannot understand why Yentl would go to America because her "greatest passion was the Torah," and he considers it likely that in New York she would have worked in a sweatshop. Despite Singer's opinion of the film, he sold the rights for his story to Streisand and, given the lack of similarity that some film musicals have with their source material, it must be stated that Streisand did not depart dramatically from the original story.[37]

## THE MUSIC

*Yentl* is a cohesive piece of work, with each segment fitting in logically with the whole, including the music. Streisand sings virtually every solo note of the score. The star's ubiquitous presence in almost every scene demands the audience's attention and makes one curious about what Yentl thinks. The songs take us into her psyche and provide details of her thoughts and her feelings for her father, Avigdor, and Hadass. Napolin and Singer provided a cognate in the play with monologues for major characters, describing conversations that the audience does not witness and reasons for some of a character's actions. Streisand's singing, however, is a more powerful device: a major diva provides compelling renditions of carefully conceived songs by Marilyn and Alan Bergman and Michel Legrand. In working on this score, the singer enjoyed the company of these old friends. She remembers Marilyn Bergman coming into her dressing room after an early nightclub performance in New York City, and Streisand met Legrand while she was appearing in *Funny Girl* in the early 1960s, when Legrand was a jazz musician in New York.[38] The trio wrote a song and then the singer would go to the Bergmans for dinner and to hear the new piece, taking a tape recorder to help her learn it.[39] Streisand has always been a striking performer, but her personal commitment to *Yentl* shines through in her singing. As will be described below, in some songs the lyrics sound around dialogue, an effect that approximates Yentl's confusion as her mind rushes forward on a separate track than the conversation. The songs in the film, therefore, function quite differently than in most musicals, and it is notable to see how well the first-time director made them work. Obviously, she had assistance from music editors, but Streisand was also responsible for the musical staging, and action during songs is usually appropriate and adds to the overall effect.

Streisand reports that her conception for the role of song in the film was that it would all be in her head when Yentl was in other people's presence, meaning that the audience would not see her lips moving, but when she was alone she would appear to be singing on the screen (all vocals were prerecorded and Streisand lip-synced to the soundtrack), causing there to be several revealing movements between non-diegetic and diegetic use of song.[40] How this conception impacts each number in the score will be part of the descriptions provided below.

## "Where Is It Written?"

The opening song is "Where Is It Written?," Yentl's statement about traditions that restrain women from studying the Talmud and enjoying other pursuits. Along with "Papa, Can You Hear Me?" and "A Piece of Sky," these songs provide Yentl's personal credo, describing her relationship to her faith and how she sees herself. It is one of the songs that feature expressions of Streisand's feminism, a strong characteristic of the film. Legrand wrote a probing melody for this first song, where sequential gestures of rising sixths open phrases dominated by descending, repeated eighth notes moving in conjunct motion followed by arpeggiated ascents in eighth notes. The song's opening idea, based on the melody, sounds in a hammered dulcimer with a piquant augmented second that helps define the Jewish milieu, a gesture that recurs later in the song, as can be heard in ▶ Audio example 22.1. After Yentl puts her father to bed, she goes into the main room and pulls his prayer shawl out of its red velvet case, donning it in an extravagant motion with her back to the camera while her figure is backlit. She prays over the hammered dulcimer introduction, singing “Amen” to open the vocal line. Just after we see her silhouette through the prayer shawl, Streisand suddenly is in profile, meaning that the lighting changed while the camera moved. As a director, Streisand favored shooting scenes in long takes, including most of this song in the house, meaning that the camera had to keep moving, lighting had to be changed, and even at times parts of the set had to be disassembled to allow for the moving camera.[41]

The song is in three verses, the first sung diegetically in the outer room with the prayer shawl. She hears her father cough in his sleep and goes to his room before she starts the second verse; her singing becomes a voice-over with added reverberation, her lips not moving while in her father’s presence. She takes a book out of his hands, removes his glasses, covers him, and kisses him. Yentl returns to the outer room to shelve the book, which she caresses as she sings about sampling fruit from multiple trees. Her singing again becomes visible and the reverberation ceases. As the third verse begins, Yentl cleans the kitchen, picking up dirty plates from the table as she sings “why does my imagination sail” over a rising orchestral effect. The close ties that Streisand sought between images and text include her musing about the point of feeling thirsty when one cannot consume the wine while scraping the plates into a bucket and commenting about the “waste.” On a high, long note (printed C#′, transposed up a major third for publication[42]) setting the word “where,” the scene shifts to the synagogue with non-diegetic singing. Streisand wanted her character to appear jailed, behind shaped dowels that support the railing of the women’s balcony.[43] We see Yentl’s face behind the bars, a caged woman looking down on the men, while again asking, “where is it written” that she cannot be part of the worship? A chanting male chorus softly joins the song in counterpoint; their vocal line does not appear in the published score. Yentl causes a scene from the balcony, calling out to her father when he falls asleep and leans to his right. He gestures to her in admonition and ascends the steps to read scripture. As the song concludes, one hears ladies gossiping about how they have heard that Yentl is learning the Talmud. The song, mostly accompanied by strings, helps establish Yentl’s feelings about the importance of her study and love for her father.

## “Papa, Can You Hear Me?”

After Yentl cuts her hair, we see her walking down a country lane and duped by occupants of a horse-drawn carriage who take her money for a ride, but leave before she can climb on, perhaps meant to show anti-Semitism, one of the few such references in the film. Preparing to sleep in a clearing away from the road, Yentl prays to God and her father in “Papa, Can You Hear Me?” The melody is in Aeolian mode on D with some accidentals and unexpected harmonies, but Legrand’s predictable use of the mode sounds somewhat like a religious chant, as can be heard in ▶ Audio example 22.2. The raised seventh sounds rarely before the final cadence. The song is in two verses with a short introduction and some melismas reminiscent of Jewish cantillation. Legrand introduces more notes outside of the mode toward the end of the second verse, but confirms the Aeolian mode in the ensuing, descending scale. For the conclusion, Legrand returns to the ascending, tonic arpeggio that sets each phrase beginning with "Papa, how I . . . ," a formula that establishes the song's ritualistic character. The entire song is diegetic as Yentl sings out to the night sky. The accompaniment includes strings, subtle use of winds, backup wordless choir in a few telling places, and hammered dulcimer with some harmonics (perhaps from a harp) at the end.

As Yentl leaves the roadway in the twilight, we hear animal sounds. The camera pans down a tree as Streisand negotiates the song's first melisma. She strikes a match and a quick view of an owl leads to Yentl lighting a candle on a tree stump that she sits next to, an altar for her nightly prayers. Streisand and co-producer Rusty Lemorande discuss the complexity in filming the scene on the DVD release: they needed an electric motor to turn the candle as the cameras rotated around the scene. Lemorande was hidden on the ground with a hairdryer for a breeze to blow Yentl's hair.[44] The camera moves slightly during the first two phrases of the first verse, helping to establish Yentl's concern and the halting, emotional nature of her prayer. When she speaks of how many eyes she sees, the camera goes down to the ground and we see stars behind her. The view fades to a profile for the verse's conclusion, as she notes how much larger everything seems since she is alone. In the second verse the camera mostly stays on Yentl's face with the candle in front of her except for one special shot, panning along the scene from a low angle behind tall grass. In the coda, Streisand has tears streaming down her face as she remembers her father kissing her before bedtime. Her last note fades as the camera backs away, leaving a tiny figure in the darkness. Streisand provides a powerful performance. Pauline Kael noted the following about her music-making in the film: "Her singing has an ardent, beseeching quality—an intimacy. And her vocal fervor lifts the movie to the level of a fantasy."[45]

## "This Is One of Those Moments"

The next song, "This Is One of Those Moments," functions along with "No Wonder," "The Way He Makes Me Feel," "Tomorrow Night," "Will Someone Ever Look at Me That Way?," and "No Matter What Happens" as songs that provide Yentl's reactions to events and the world around her. Sometimes she has difficulty responding in a conversation because her own thoughts so consume her. In later songs listed above, the cognitive dissonance between Yentl's interior monologue and what surrounds her makes for humorous juxtapositions, but in "This Is One of Those Moments" Yentl is elated to have been accepted in the yeshiva and that Avigdor will be her study partner. She is confident and has no reason for the doubts that later plague her. As Streisand remembers, this is the only song where the Bergmans wrote the lyrics before Legrand composed the music. They decided the song was needed and it was written and orchestrated within days.[46] It bears a strong feminist feeling because a woman sings it, but she is disguised as a man and functioning as one in the yeshiva. The number starts with a recitative with text set more or less in speech rhythms, the opening of which returns later as the coda. There are two verses in a driving duple meter, the second presented an augmented second higher, which adds excitement to a song that also includes internal modulations in each verse. The refrain of each verse opens with Yentl's realization that she now possesses things that males cannot steal from her, a segment that includes more syncopation than sounds in the verses, as can be heard in ▶ Audio example 22.3. This is an energetic power ballad that Streisand rips through, sounding especially impressive on some higher notes where she focuses her tone and cuts straight through the texture.

The entire song is non-diegetic, the sung lines interweaved intricately into the scene, skirting dialogue as necessary. The lyrics interact with images and action. The only way to appreciate the complex dance between Streisand's voice-over and diegetic dialogue is to watch the scene, but it is worth some description here. During the opening recitative, another student (Shimmele, whom she met at the inn) congratulates her on being accepted and Rabbi Zalman discusses with Avigdor how advanced Anshel is and who should be "his" study partner. Shimmele offers himself; the rabbi cruelly tells him that he is less advanced than his chickens. Yentl names Avigdor, and the rabbi lets his prize student decide. Just before Avigdor says, "We'll see," the faster tempo for the first verse starts. At times sung lines and dialogue sound simultaneously and music fades into the background. Once the verses start, dialogue becomes less important and one focuses on interaction between lyrics and onscreen action. Early in the first verse we learn that Yentl is the third generation in her family to study, and at that moment we see males of every age in the yeshiva. Avigdor is on a ladder at a tall shelf piling one book after another into Anshel's arms, making her collapse from the weight while Streisand sings lyrics celebrating the joys of studying. When Yentl sings that she remembers everything her father taught her, we see Anshel taking a book, caressing its cover, and opening it, a bright light reflecting off the pages onto her face. (In the commentary, we learn that they used searchlights through a window to create the effect.[47]) Through the refrain of the first verse we see men of various ages interacting in the yeshiva, including two brief snippets of Avigdor and Anshel arguing, the second ending with Avigdor covering his friend's mouth. Toward the refrain's end and during an orchestral interlude a game of keep-away occurs with Anshel's hat; Avigdor grabs it for her. (Streisand notes that they improvised the scene in front of a handheld camera.[48])

At the opening of the second verse, Streisand announces that her character can "open doors," which we see in the film, with Avigdor and Anshel emerging into the rain and sharing an umbrella, stepping in a puddle just as Streisand remembers Singer mentioning in the short story.[49] The film from that point provides few other images mentioned in the lyrics, with this verse designed to show that Avigdor and Anshel become close friends. As the refrain starts, Anshel walks toward a crowded courtyard with students below and Rabbi Zalman above, asking questions. Anshel goes down to join Avigdor. Two students miss the first question; Avigdor comes close but misstates the page number for the reference, which Anshel corrects. Avigdor goes over to place his arm around his friend. We jump to an indoor mirror where they regard each other, Avigdor again pulling his friend to him and smiling, and Anshel putting her arm around Avigdor after they walk outside to end the song. Toward the end of the film, there is a brief reprise of "Moments" just as Avigdor leaves in the carriage to return home and Yentl sees him for the last time.

## "No Wonder"

Here we remain inside Yentl's head, but she interacts less comfortably with the people around her. She is with Avigdor at Hadass's house for dinner. The family meets Anshel for the first time and the pleasantries of such encounters become complicated for Yentl when she sees Avigdor transfixed by his fiancée. The title character's inner monologue mostly involves her feelings for Avigdor and Hadass. We have all been in complicated social situations where we must distinguish what we think from what others say, an experience captured delightfully in this scene.[50] Yentl's singing purposefully conflicts with some of the dialogue but it remains comprehensible, illustrating how she experiences this dinner. The scene develops for almost 2′30″ before the music starts, allowing Yentl to observe how attentively the nervous Hadass caters to her fiancé's needs, and also getting through the family's initial questions of Anshel so that she might be occupied singing later. The song starts unobtrusively as Hadass's father calls out his wife for questioning Anshel so closely. Hadass clumsily brings a napkin to Avigdor as the orchestra starts, and Yentl starts to sing as Avigdor lifts his arm so that Hadass can place the napkin in his lap. Anshel reacts in amusement. It becomes a domestic comedy as Hadass, who also spills food, gives Avigdor far too much horseradish and rushes to fill his glass when he chokes. All the while, Hadass's father questions Avigdor about his studies and learns that Anshel is the best student in the class. The disparity between the two young women in the scene—one able to function as a man because of her clothing and the other confined to the domestic sphere—is a powerful statement about women in this society.

As in the previous song, imagery from the lyrics dictates some of the action. For example, just before Yentl sings about how much time Hadass has to consider her appearance, the young woman regards herself in the mirror and her mother straightens her hair and blouse. Yentl muses about Hadass thinking about food she might fix while refusing the tomatoes being passed. The rhyme "potatoes" comes from Hadass's father as he offers the bowl to Anshel. Just a few lines later, the song's lyrics talk about how Hadass "fusses" over Avigdor; the scene includes that and Hadass's mother doing the same for her husband. It is another complicated scene; Streisand reports in her commentary that the cast had only nine days to rehearse all of the musical scenes, as opposed to the six months made available for rehearsing musical numbers in the film version of *Funny Girl*.[51] The music for "No Wonder" is simple, with lyrics mostly set to plausible speech rhythms and the melody in a fairly narrow range. There are two full verses and a third seems to start, but it is a short coda.

The song returns later in the film with only Hadass and Anshel at the dinner table and later having dessert and tea in the parlor. They have been left alone by Hadass's parents. The reprise is in a similar structure, but the verses are shorter with orchestral underscoring for dialogue as they move to the other room. This scene includes one of Yentl's most humorous moments of confusion as her thoughts make it difficult for her to converse: she stumbles trying to tell Hadass whether she wants milk or lemon in her tea, as can be heard in ▶ Audio example 22.4. In both scenes with the song, Streisand went to great lengths to make Amy Irving appear as desirable as possible as Hadass, backlighting her hair and fretting over every aspect of her costume, joking in the commentary that she treated her like a "doll." "No Wonder, Part 3" sounds in Yentl's last scene with Hadass, with underscoring beginning after Yentl tells her, "I love you, too." Yentl leaves in the carriage and sings new words for just the last several lines of the song, lasting less than 45 seconds.

## "The Way He Makes Me Feel"

"The Way He Makes Me Feel" is Yentl's admission of her love for Avigdor. The song is as much about lust as love, the outburst spurred by her view of the naked Avigdor at the swimming hole. She has to beg not to be stripped and thrown in the river, her vehemence finally convincing Avigdor to desist. When she runs away the music begins, Yentl rushing home as she admits that she is "breathless." The number begins non-diegetically, but we start to see her singing as she runs away. For the initial A section, the orchestra accompanies evocatively with string tremolo to describe her feeling of "shiver," as can be heard in ▶ Audio example 22.5. She arrives in her room and flops on her bed, arising and undressing in front of the mirror as she finishes the full AABA form. After an orchestral interlude she repeats the final BA as audience members become voyeurs, watching Yentl have a sponge bath (while remembering the water on Avigdor's naked body) and putting on her nightgown. She accomplishes these things with a minimum of exposure but also suggestively, such as passing her hands slowly over her breasts with her nightgown open down her chest as she again remembers in song the feelings that Avigdor inspires in her. On her last note, Yentl is in bed and blows out the candle. It is a strikingly feminine scene for Yentl and a powerful symbol of her sexuality, part of the film's positive feminism. The A sections of the tune are mostly two-measure, arch-shaped gestures with a contrasting B section of descending eight-note gestures as she sings about "falling," yet another song in the score with old-fashioned word-painting.

## "Tomorrow Night"

"Tomorrow Night" again finds Yentl trapped in her inner thoughts while confronting a challenging situation: being fitted for her wedding suit by a frustrated tailor and his assistant who cannot accommodate this "man." One says, "Look at him!," prompting

Yentl to regard herself, throwing us into a complicated number where the scene careens between the tailor's shop and the ceremony and reception "tomorrow night," offering many of the wedding scenes that we see. Streisand based the action upon a rehearsal videotape made early in the process in Los Angeles.[52] When they filmed the scene, she asked the cameraman to weave around the actors in their movement and take shots that could be used during editing.[53] Gillian Lynne served as the choreographer not long after she had worked on *Cats* in London. Interaction between lyrics and images is again striking: Yentl rejects the notion of fleeing because she would miss Avigdor, sung as we see her turning around to look at Avigdor at the wedding; and later in the song she lists the advantages of her course of action (mostly keeping her close to Avigdor and Hadass) while the audience sees shots of her friends at the wedding. The song moves between diegetic singing when she is alone in the tailor's shop and voice-over when the tailor and assistant join her and for wedding shots. She makes the tailors leave the room when she changes clothes, which is when she sings in the shop. As Garrett Stewart notes, one of her segments ends with "Get out," and the tailors hear her when they enter, as can be heard in ▶ Audio example 22.6. This is one of the few moments in the film that her song is heard by someone else.[54]

Actions in the shop are related to what follows in the wedding, such as the tailors circling around Yentl trying to figure out what is wrong with the clothing, switching immediately to the newly married couple being circled around in a wedding dance. The song opens with two sections starting with recitative set to eighth notes based on repetitive motives followed by the title text set more melodically, each such iteration closing with four measures of panicked text that leads to humorous interactions in the shop. Another section that resembles recitative follows in which Yentl muses about fleeing, rejecting the thought because she loves Avigdor. Yentl then addresses her father in a section opening like the first two but with the note values now mostly in sixteenths. She wonders if this is the wedding that he dreamed about for his daughter, but then the music changes and becomes more resolute as she considers the complicated feelings among the three principals. The section concludes in rushing triplets, ending with images of a runaway train as we see Yentl in the wedding chair dance. A setting of the title text concludes the number dramatically as men spin Yentl and Hadass in the chair dance and Yentl spins by herself in the shop.

## "Will Someone Ever Look at Me That Way?"

The couple lives with Hadass's parents but find a night when they are alone and can invite Avigdor for dinner. After the meal, they sit down with the two scholars studying while Hadass sews. Avigdor notes how lovingly Hadass looks at her "husband" while Yentl sees how Avigdor regards Hadass and launches into this song. Avigdor finally cannot abide seeing how the woman he loves obviously adores someone else and leaves. The song's accompaniment includes a woman humming in counterpoint to the sung melody. Streisand wanted to account for the hummed line in the film, so as the music starts

Avigdor comments that Hadass should keep humming because it sounds beautiful. The hummed track was not added to the mix until later; the performer paused when one sees Hadass breathe.[55] It is the only suggestion in the film that Hadass might be musical and unusual because of Streisand's domination of the music-making. Streisand's singing in "Will Someone Ever Look at Me That Way?" is non-diegetic. It is a subdued scene dominated by meaningful looks among the three characters cued to what the lyrics state in a given phrase. Marked "Moderato Rubato," the song is essentially in two strophes, with the music of each being the same for five measures and the remainder of the second strophe derived from the first. Legrand set the text primarily in eighth notes, not unlike recitative sections in "Tomorrow Night." "Will Someone Ever Look at Me That Way?" is mostly in Mixolydian mode on G with many F-naturals in the melody. Chords change over a slow-moving bass line; the opening eight measures, for example, are over a pedal G followed by four measures of a pedal F. The feeling is contemplative, with little in the music that draws attention away from the probing text or meaningful gazes in the scene.

## "No Matter What Happens"

In marrying Hadass, Anshel banked on her remaining innocent, but the wife finally speaks to a rabbi and learns that she can demand that her husband attend to her sexual needs. Yentl therefore can no longer maintain the sham, resulting in this song. She emotionally tells Hadass that there are things that she wishes she could explain and puts her to bed. The first song written for use in this placement was "The Moon and I."[56] The DVD includes Streisand performing the song with piano and visuals consisting of storyboard drawings,[57] but the number was deemed too complicated and expensive to film. "The Moon and I" carries a strong 1930s feel, different from anything else in the score, perhaps belonging in a Gershwin musical. The moon remained a star presence in the scene while Streisand sings "No Matter What Happens." The filming also includes images of water. She sings most of the number outdoors, leaving Hadass in bed as she begins and returning to their room before the end. Hadass spurs on Yentl's need to come clean, but the lyrics primarily describe her love for Avigdor and need to tell him the truth. The entire song is diegetic, with Streisand as diva rendering a number in a style that fits easily in her usual repertory. Garrett Stewart calls "No Matter What Happens" the film's "first full-throated virtuoso piece for Streisand."[58] This is true about the number as a whole, but there are previous songs in *Yentl* in which Streisand expresses herself powerfully, such as sections of "Papa, Can You Hear Me?" and "This Is One of Those Moments." "No Matter What Happens" was one of two songs, along with "The Way He Makes Me Feel," that Streisand recorded in studio versions to help fill out the soundtrack album.

In the film, "No Matter What Happens" begins with music from "Will Someone Ever Look at Me That Way," an effective reprise of one verse with a new, appropriate text. Yentl admits that she can never look at Hadass like she gazes at the person she believes to be her husband and also that she cannot provide Hadass with what she desires. The form of "No Matter What Happens," after the introduction from "Will Someone," is based upon a returning A section: ABA′CDA″E with a brief coda. Legrand's rambling form allows Yentl to travel far, starting with the "shadows" that she had desired and moving all the way to stating that she must reveal her gender to Avigdor and admit her love for him. The song opens in D major (sung by Streisand a perfect fourth lower), with a sudden excursion into D-flat major in the D section when she declares that she must feel his touch and moving onto her desire for freedom, expressed poignantly at the top of her range. The G-flat written in the music that keeps sounding as the top note in the passage is rewritten as an F-sharp on the last note of the section over an A7 chord to pivot back to D major. Streisand then drops a major tenth, strikingly opening the next phrase with no breath, waiting two more measures before breathing and producing a surprising timbre low in her range. The climax high in Streisand's range and phrase extension can be heard in ▶ Audio example 22.7. The closing E section includes yet another exciting climax on repeated motives, this time starting with the title text, closing out a number clearly conceived with this stunning performer in mind.

## "A Piece of Sky"

This song that concludes *Yentl* occurs in the film's final segment: Yentl is on a ship apparently far from land. There is no indication of where she is going, but the suggestion is that she has joined millions of her co-religionists who immigrated to America in this period. A big sung finale for Streisand was probably inevitable in a film where she has already sung so much. The number includes material from both "Papa, Can You Hear Me?" and "Where Is It Written?," tying it closely to her character's journey. This finale answers the questions asked by those titles. References to "Papa" sound between phrases of "A Piece of Sky," but at the end of the song Yentl states that she feels her father's presence, bringing a sense of certainty to her path that she could not feel earlier. Legrand's quotation of "Written" finds Yentl asking for a person to be part of her life rather than why she cannot study Talmud, the original intention of the film's first song. Yentl has not given up on the Talmud, but perhaps she wants a lifelong study partner who will love her and believe that a woman can be an intellectual presence, which Avigdor could not accept. Her experience of love has changed her, but Yentl has not fled the Old World in defeat. Streisand was unable to end this highly personal project on a sour note: "A Piece of Sky" finds Yentl hopeful as she looks to a new place that might grant her heart's desire while resuming her life as a woman. As stated above, Singer scorned this ending and said Yentl would end up working in a sweatshop—it is certainly possible Yentl's apparent expectations were unrealistic for the time—but for Streisand the feminist this might have been the only possible ending.[59] The alternative of a defeated Yentl slinking away from Avigdor and Hadass and perhaps never reconstructing her own life would have been too bitter.

The movement between diegetic singing and voice-over in "A Piece of Sky" is inconsistent with what has been done earlier in the movie. The song opens diegetically with

Yentl at the ship's stern, switching to voice-over as she enters the cabin and starts to sing material from "Where Is It Written?" She passes other immigrants, and songs have usually been only inside Yentl's head when she is in the presence of other people. Soon, however, she emerges from darkness as she leaves the cabin after ascending one floor, singing diegetically. The song needs a big finale, which probably would not be effective as a voice-over. Yentl performs the final phrases dramatically and in full voice at the rear of the upper deck. She invites her father to "watch me fly," which she does, holding the last note a spine-tingling 19 seconds as she disappears in the pulling-away helicopter shot that follows, as can be heard in ▶ Audio example 22.8.

The song is ternary, the first section with four statements of A, each modulating upward a half-step and the final two with interjections from "Papa, Can You Hear Me?," followed by the B material that opens with the notion of the security one feels with feet planted, and then the melodic quotation from "Where Is It Written?" The A material returns with more reminiscences from "Papa," expressed with certainty and leading to the closing, with Streisand fully in diva mode and positioning Yentl as a feminist icon. She sings this song at the published pitch. One can debate whether or not the story should end this way, but our singing hero delivers the goods. Garrett Stewart notes that some criticized the film's final number as being too close in spirit to "Don't Rain on My Parade" from *Funny Girl*—also sung on a ship—but he goes on to describe the scene as "an emotional turning point [that] has become closure, satisfying in its very emotional latency." Yentl leaves Europe and "the man to whom she could not capitulate—moves toward a mythic New World alone, a self in waiting but no longer hiding."[60]

## CONCLUSION

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the songs in *Yentl* in terms of explaining the title character's emotional turbulence and providing her inner voice, which operates in counterpoint with perceived reality throughout the film. Streisand's vocal presence is paramount, and that powerful female voice helps emphasize the film's feminist stance. Her voice in her prime lived up to this praise from pianist Glenn Gould when he reviewed her album of classical songs in 1976: "one of the natural wonders of the age, an instrument of infinite diversity and timbral resonance."[61] Stewart notes that *Yentl* was called a "Film with Music" but suggests that a better suggestion of genre might have been "revisionary musical screen narrative," where the heroine reaches a point where something must be said but those words cannot be voiced in that situation, so she sings her thoughts.[62] The audience partly accepts this solution because of Streisand's recognition as a singer. Once, while regarding Anshel, Avigdor observes: "Just like my brother, you're always in a little world of your own." That world comes alive in Yentl's voiced and unvoiced singing, inviting the audience into her music of the mind, a place made compellingly possible by Barbra Streisand's artistry.

## NOTES

1. Singer published "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy: A Story" in *Commentary* in September 1962. The entire text appears at https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/yentl-the-yeshiva-boy-a-story/, November 27, 2019.
2. Linda Pohly, *The Barbra Streisand Companion: A Guide to Her Vocal Style and Repertory*, Companions to Celebrated Musicians (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 151.
3. Christopher Anderson, *Barbra: The Way She Is* (New York: William Morrow/HarperCollins Publisher, 2006), 287.
4. Anne Edwards, *Streisand: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 303.
5. Edwards, *Streisand*, 402.
6. Anderson, *Barbra*, 278.
7. Anderson, *Barbra*, 279.
8. Anderson, *Barbra*, 280, and Edwards, *Streisand*, 407–408.
9. Anderson, *Barbra*, 283.
10. Anderson, *Barbra*, 285. According to Pohly, Streisand's soundtrack from *Yentl* was her thirty-second album released by Columbia (*The Barbra Streisand Companion*, 93).
11. For example, in the *New York Times* article on nominations for the 1984 Academy Awards, Aljean Harmetz noted that Streisand failed to be nominated as director or actress and the film was not nominated for best picture. See Harmetz's "'Endearment' Tops Oscar Nominations," *New York Times*, February 17, 1984, C1.
12. Anderson, *Barbra*, 277.
13. Stephen J. Whitfield makes Jewish identity in *Yentl* a major theme in his "Yentl," *Jewish Social Studies* 5, no. 1/2 (Autumn 1998–Winter 1999): 154–176. For a consideration of Jewish context in Singer's short story and some comparison of that with Streisand's film, see Joel West, "The Ontology of Yentl: Umberto Eco, Semiosis, Mimesis, Closets and Existence and How to Read 'Yentl the Yeshiva Boy,'" *Semiotica* 226 (2019): 209–224. For a study of Jewishness in Streisand's films, see Vincent Brook, "Chameleon Man and Unruly Woman: Dustin Hoffman and Barbra Streisand," *Shofar* 33, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 30–56, and Felicia Herman, "The Way She *Really* Is: Image of Jews and Women in the Films of Barbra Streisand," in *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture*, ed. Joyce Antler (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press by University Press of New England, 1998), 171–190, esp. 184–189.
14. Streisand's feminist stance in *Yentl* did not fall on deaf ears. It was mentioned in reviews of the film and even helped inspire a later anthology of essays: Danya Ruttenberg, ed., *Yentl's Revenge: The Next Wave of Jewish Feminism* (Seattle: Seal Press, 2001). Streisand's feminism and the sexual daring with which she approached the project is a major theme in Allison Fernley and Paula Maloof, "Review: *Yentl* by Barbra Streisand," *Film Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1985): 38–46. June Sochen places Streisand's feminist stance as a female Jewish entertainer in context with other such figures in her "From Sophie Tucker to Barbra Streisand: Jewish Women Entertainers as Reformers," in *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture*, ed. Joyce Antler (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press by University Press of New England, 1998), 68–84, esp. 77–79. For consideration of how some commentators argued that *Yentl* could have been a stronger feminist statement and that the film functions on one level as "a woman's quest for education," see Marjorie Garber, "Category Crises: The Way of the Cross and the Jewish Star," in *Queer Theory and the Jewish*

*Question*, ed. Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini, Between Men—Between Women: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Studies (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 19–40, esp. 22–23. For consideration of the film as a "queer text," see Michele Aaron, "The Queer Jew and Cinema: From Yidl to Yentl and Back and Beyond," *Jewish Culture and History* 3, no. 1 (2000): 36–38.

15. Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy."
16. The Bergmans and Legrand wrote a song about this aspect of the story called "Several Sins a Day." It did not appear in the film, but the second disc of the DVD release includes a track with Streisand singing it and the storyboards rendered by an artist as the video (Barbra Streisand, director, *Yentl*, Director's Extended Edition, DVD [Metro Goldwyn Mayer 83904 11776 80, 1983]). The recurring A section includes effective patter and the rapid movement between F major and F minor lends it an exotic feel. If it appeared in the film, it would be one of the most Jewish-sounding pieces in the score. A distinctive aspect of the text is all of the punishments that Yentl states she might face for her sinfulness, some sounding like the medieval tortures one might expect in a painting by Bosch. Like the other cut song, "The Moon and I," "Several Sins a Day" is in a style somewhat apart from most of the score.
17. Warren Hoffman, *The Passing Game: Queering Jewish American Culture* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 135.
18. See, e.g., Dana Beyer, "Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy: A Modern Transgender Hero," *Huffpost*, October 8, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/yentl-the-yeshiva-boy-a-m_b_5943198. Beyer reacted to an updated version of the Napolin/Singer play at Theatre J in Washington, DC.
19. I will refer to Yentl as Anshel when she is dealing with others who believe her to be male but use feminine pronouns in reference to the character.
20. Singer uses the word in this context in his story. It appears in the film in the song "Tomorrow Night."
21. Davi Napoleon, *Chelsea on the Edge: The Adventures of an American Theater* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1991), 152. Napoleon provides considerable background on the play's conception and its run in Brooklyn and on Broadway (151–163).
22. Napoleon, *Chelsea on the Edge*, 161.
23. Leah Napolin and Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Yentl* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1977), 13–14.
24. Napolin and Singer, *Yentl*, 14–18.
25. Napolin and Singer, *Yentl*, 29–30.
26. Napolin and Singer, *Yentl*, 38–44.
27. Napolin and Singer, *Yentl*, 75–77.
28. Napolin and Singer, *Yentl*, 77–85.
29. Napolin and Singer, *Yentl*, 93–95.
30. Napolin and Singer, *Yentl*, 96–97.
31. *Yentl*, Director's Extended Edition, DVD.
32. Hoffman, *The Passing Game*, 125. In this chapter of his study (pp. 124–145), the author describes several short stories by Singer with queer characters.
33. *Yentl*, disc 1.
34. *Yentl*, disc 1.
35. Anderson, *Barbra*, 275, 280. Whitfield has reported that the screenplay had eighteen rewrites ("Yentl," 157).

36. I. B. Singer, "I. B. Singer Talks to I. B. Singer about the Movie 'Yentl,'" *New York Times Review of Books*, January 29, 1984, http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/97/04/27/reviews/streisand-singer.html.
37. For a fascinating contextualization of Singer's story and Streisand's film in Jewish culture and cinematic history, and a comparison of the story and film, see Marcia Pally and Harlan Jacobson, "Kaddish for the Fading Image of Jews in Film," *Film Comment* 20, no. 1 (January/February 1984): 49–55, 78.
38. *Yentl*, Audio Commentary by Barbra Streisand and Co-Producer Rusty Lemorande, disc 1.
39. Audio Commentary.
40. Audio Commentary.
41. Audio Commentary.
42. For a score, see Michel Legrand and Alan and Marilyn Bergman, *Yentl: Original Movie Soundtrack* (N.p.: Emanuel Music, Threesome Music Co., and Ennes Productions, Ltd., 1983).
43. Audio Commentary.
44. Audio Commentary.
45. Quoted in Neal Gabler, *Barbra Streisand: Redefining Beauty, Femininity, and Power* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 194.
46. Audio Commentary.
47. Audio Commentary.
48. Audio Commentary.
49. Audio Commentary.
50. Aaron posits that the songs in *Yentl* where one hears both the main character's inner thoughts and public conversation form part of the film's role as a "queer text": "In this way the film works to discharge exclusive realms. It interlocks such seeming opposites as man and woman, public and private, even dialogue and soliloquy, through defying realist conventions of sound" ("The Queer Jew and Cinema," 37).
51. Audio Commentary. It is hard to believe that there were actually six months for such rehearsals in *Funny Girl*, but clearly Streisand remembered a much longer available period.
52. Because of the project's limited budget, Streisand worked out much of the musical staging before leaving the country to film *Yentl*. On the second disc DVD release, she included three tracks based upon the videos that she shot with friends serving as actors and in various homes or sets during 1981 and 1982: "Where Is It Written?" (both the original video and another switching between that and the film to show how closely she had it worked out before starting production) and "No Wonder" (in one video again alternating between that and the film).
53. Audio Commentary.
54. Garrett Stewart, "Singer Sung: Voice as Avowal in Streisand's *Yentl*," *Mosaic* 18, no. 4 (1985): 151.
55. Audio Commentary.
56. Audio Commentary.
57. It is available on disc 2 of the DVD. Text on the screen at the beginning of that track suggests that the song was written for Yentl's *mikvah*, or the ritual bath before a wedding. Such a scene does not appear in the film, and in the commentary with the film Streisand reports that "The Moon and I" was composed for the same scene as "No Matter What Happens."

58. Stewart, "Singer Sung," 151.
59. Whitfield does state that there were Jewish women studying Talmud and preaching in the late nineteenth century ("Yentl," 162–163).
60. Stewart, "Singer Sung," 152.
61. Glenn Gould, "Streisand as Schwarzkopf," *High Fidelity Magazine* 26 (May 1976): 73.
62. Stewart, "Singer Sung," 136.

# PART VI

# MUSICAL RENAISSANCE, MUSICAL REFLEXIVITY

## CHAPTER 23

# THEATRICALITY, ARTIFICE, AND AFFECTIVE SPACE IN THE WORKS OF BAZ LUHRMANN

### ROBYNN J. STILWELL

> "I like large parties, they're so intimate. Small parties, there isn't any privacy."
>
> —Jordan Baker, in *The Great Gatsby*[1]

These words might be F. Scott Fitzgerald's, put in the mouth of his golfing good-time girl Jordan Baker, but they resonate strongly with the aesthetic choices of director Baz Luhrmann. And although critic David Edelstein is ambivalent about Luhrmann's 2013 adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, he declares that the film "is unmistakably F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby.*" Edelstein's strongest praise comes in his assertion that "No one can say that the Aussie hot dog Luhrmann lacks the requisite vulgarity."[2]

To read criticism or scholarship about Luhrmann is almost to be overwhelmed by words and phrases like "fantastical," "excess(ive)," "lurid," and the occasional, more restrained, "seldom subtle." At times, the descriptions of his films suggest, if not outright state, that experiencing them is an assault on the senses, implying a closeness between audience and cinematic materials. And yet, some of Luhrmann's most affective moments come with an expansion of physical and psychological space, a marked distancing from the audience through theatricality, artifice, and a pulling back of the image's frame. Unlike most filmmakers who opt for close-ups and a stripping away of extraneous decoration at such moments, Luhrmann tends toward the spectacular; in context, however, this unreality can allow a revelation, even elevation of emotional truth—and paradoxically, often of intimacy.

The emotional climax of Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby*, and the moment of greatest intimacy between the two main characters Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway, occurs after the vehicular homicide in which Daisy hits Tom's mistress Myrtle with Gatsby's great yellow Duesenberg. After returning to his big, empty mansion, Gatsby reveals his entire backstory to Nick, including the fabrication of his rich, extravagant persona; this artifice had aided him in winning the heart, and temporarily the hand, of debutante Daisy, with whom the young soldier had fallen desperately in love. And yet, there is no new information in this sequence at all.

Over the previous couple of hours, we have seen flashbacks as Jordan tells the tale of Daisy and Gatsby as youthful lovers, torn apart by World War I, and a more extravagant exposition by Gatsby of his transformation from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby as he and Nick hurtle portentously about town in the fateful car. Luhrmann is respectful of Fitzgerald's dramatic structure, and all these scenes are in the novel in approximately the same places. But this final moment of revelation rushes by in a mere paragraph, referring back to the earlier conversation, ending with a breathless, "but he wanted to talk about Daisy," followed by pages of just that. While in the novel, this keeps the focus squarely on the primary couple of Gatsby and Daisy, in the film, the principle dyad is Nick and Gatsby. The sheer weight of Nick's physical presence (and of Tobey Maguire's familiar, slightly goofy charisma) keeps activated a frame of narration that can slip out of the reader's gaze much more easily than a cinematic audience's.

Despite the paucity of plot at this narrative juncture, Luhrmann literally expands this sequence, not just in time but in space, giving Gatsby's relationship with Nick weight equal to that with Daisy; and if you want to read Nick's feelings as more than mere narrator to Gatsby's protagonist, there is ample space to do so. Yet the intimacy is not evoked with nearness and a lack of barriers, emotional and physical; Luhrmann employs an opposite strategy, beginning the scene with an exterior of Gatsby's vast mansion and the echoing sound of his voice. This creates an expansive acoustic space in which the voices are distant, as removed from us as the small images of Gatsby and Nick, once we enter the grand halls. The giant pillars and billowing drapes threaten to dwarf and obscure them in a distant room, and as they pass out of the portico, the camera pulls out and up again, looking down upon them in a gesture that further distances, and indeed threatens to disorient, the audience (see ▶ Video example 23.1).

This drawing of attention to artifice is often allied with the term "theatrical" (Dictionary.com's definition includes "artificial, pompous, spectacular, or extravagantly histrionic," which sounds a good deal like a typical description of Luhrmann's style, perhaps excepting "pompous"). "Theatrical" is a term culturally at odds with "cinematic"—the cinema has historically striven for a seamless experience of "realism" or "naturalism," both of which must be carefully constructed, but such work is typically effaced to create the smooth flow of narrative and diegetic world that psychoanalytic film theory often cast as a dream (despite the fact that many dreams are often illogical and disjunct). Luhrmann (who often cites Italian grand opera, Bollywood films, and ballroom dancing as influences—ones he wears on his sleeve) opts for theatricality over naturalism, and his use of expansion and expansiveness at moments of intimacy are striking.

In discussing spectacle and intimacy in P!nk's concert film *Funhouse*—a cinematic record of a theatrical event—Lori Burns and Jada Watson engage a concept from the acting teacher and theorist Konstantin Stanislavsky, that of "*public solitude*." In his didactic novel *An Actor Prepares* (1936/1948), Stanislavsky describes an acting exercise in which a circle of light defines the space around the actor on a darkened stage, starting from just his head and gradually expanding to take in the entire room. The actor is meant to concentrate on the created space and his relationship to and within this "circle of attention." When the circle is small, the actor is in "solitude in public. You are in public because we are all here. It is solitude because you are divided from us by the small circle of attention. During a performance, before an audience of thousands, you can always enclose yourself in this circle like a snail in its shell" (1948, 78). This exercise helps the student actor achieve and present a state of solitude though on display upon a stage, and to draw the audience into the intimacy of that performance. "In other words," say Burns and Watson, "the pretence of the division works to the opposite effect by creating a stronger point of contact with the audience."[3]

This description resonates strongly with the concept of the "fantastical gap," a diffuse border I noted between diegetic and non-diegetic in film music.[4] It seemed to me that the frequent crossing of that vague, contested boundary did not invalidate the division between the depicted diegesis and the conceptual non-diegetic construct of the film as an entirety. Although the border is permeable, I will not go as far as Ben Winters in calling the division a "fallacy,"[5] because of the potency of this transition across the boundary—if the boundary did not matter, our senses would not set up a series of checkpoints and landmines along it, marking out a sonic "circle of attention."

Luhrmann uses a similar "landmine" strategy within the diegesis of his films, to draw attention to the bubbles of intimacy he is creating within that larger space, usually between two characters who are or will be lovers. In the stereotypical conception of a romantic film, two characters' eyes meet across a crowded room, and all else fades away—a fantastical version of this happens in *West Side Story* (Jerome Robbins/Robert Wise, 1961), as Tony and Maria first see each other. Luhrmann does almost the opposite: in the simplest form, each character is surrounded by their personal circle of intimacy, or selfhood; Luhrmann then enlivens these borders as two characters draw together, highlighting the distance and (perhaps metaphorical) barriers. Instead of creating an ambiguous twilight zone between realms like diegetic and non-diegetic, however, Luhrmann marks out these characters' "circles" so that we are highly aware of where their attention comes into contact—those borders are set alight, like a thief blowing smoke or throwing powder into the air to reveal the laser detection beams of an alarm system.

Romeo and Juliet meet through a large aquarium set into a wall, the fish and their distorted reflections in the curved glass constantly illuminating their shy flirtation and sudden shared intimacy, until Juliet's nurse comes to snatch her away (see Figure 23.1 and ▶ Video example 23.2). At the Mission Ball in Australia, Lady Sarah looks up to see the Drover at the top of the stairs, resplendent in his white dinner jacket, in a reverse Cinderella moment; they are drawn inexorably together across the dance floor, while dancers and a proliferation of Chinese lanterns cross constantly between them and before our eyes, frustrating their (and the audience's) desiring gazes, and marking

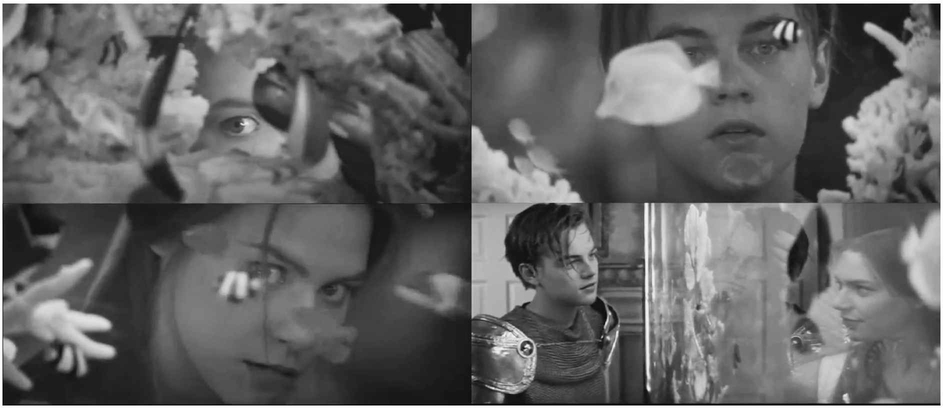

**FIGURE 23.1** Romeo and Juliet meet through an aquarium.

the distance they still have to traverse to reach each other. When they finally meet, the shot is from across the room, but now they are both enveloped in each other's circle of attention, at a distance from us, the audience (see Figure 23.2).

In each case, the classic shot-reverse shot cinematic language is both disrupted and activated by the intervening materials.[6] Notably, both of these scenes contain no dialogue, only music[7] and movement, the two most potent ways of measuring out time and space, respectively. It is therefore unsurprising that these moments, although they appear in all of Luhrmann's films, are particularly pointed in ones that are most explicitly musicals,

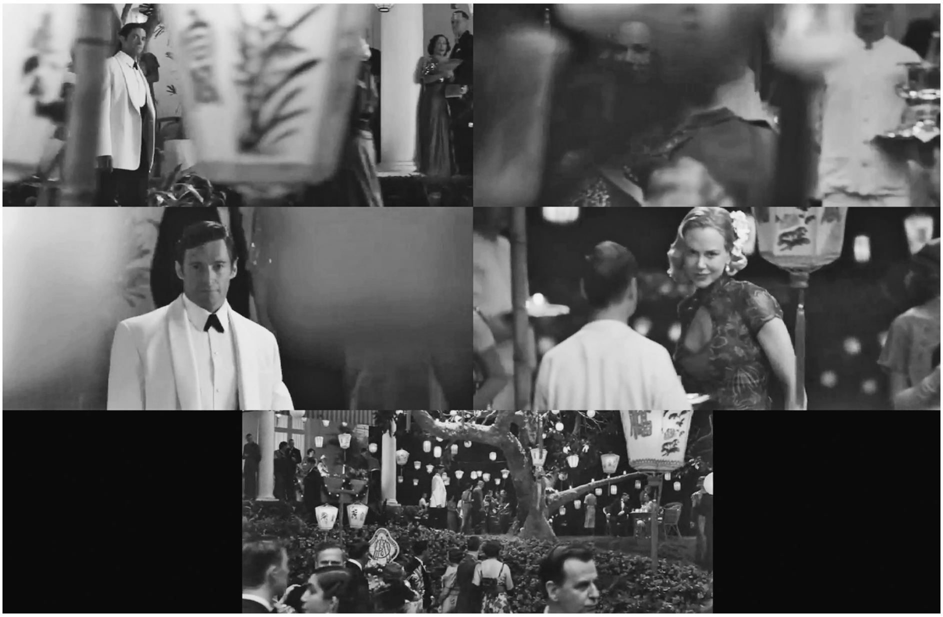

**FIGURE 23.2** Lady Sarah and the Drover see each other at the Mission Ball.

*Strictly Ballroom* and *Moulin Rouge!* And as they are in musicals, these moments are more extended and complex, often layered spatially and/or temporally, and carry more narrative weight.

This tendency is at the heart of an aesthetic that Luhrmann and his creative partner and wife, production and costume designer Catherine Martin, define as the "Red Curtain [Trilogy] aesthetic," a term that in itself draws attention to the border between theatricality and reality. One of the defining traits of the aesthetic is its referential density, and another is its invitation to follow along *and* read ahead. This suggests the folding of linear exposition into layers, and Luhrmann's background in and love of dance means a sensitivity to the dynamics of space, focus, and movement that can sweep up the audience and heighten their awareness of the artifice *in order to* evoke emotion, rather than the more passive dream experience normally prized by the "cinematic." After an exploration of the "Red Curtain Trilogy Aesthetic," we shall turn to examining key narrative scenes of both *Strictly Ballroom* and *Moulin Rouge!* that demonstrate the aesthetic in action, heightening emotion through obvious artifice articulated by space and movement and a particular tendency to heighten intimacy through distance.

## The Red Curtain Trilogy Aesthetic

> "Baz is so different from all the other filmmakers out there—he's very whimsical and theatrical and fantastical"
>
> —John Leguizamo[8]

Luhrmann groups his first three films, *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1995), and *Moulin Rouge!* (2000), into the Red Curtain Trilogy. On the most basic level, the three films each begin with a red velvet curtain, opening as if on a proscenium arch. But Luhrmann has a more pervasive aesthetic in mind, described often during the commentary and extras contained in the DVD box set. The red curtain signals a "theatricalized cinematic form." It "reminds our audience that they're watching a movie. Don't go to sleep, don't go into the dream. It's the opposite of most cinema." By thwarting the classical Hollywood (and classical film theory) ideal of the dreamlike world, to be absorbed passively by the audience, Luhrmann wishes to create "audience-participation cinema."

To do this, he specifies that the film must be based on familiar myths, so that the audience knows where it is going. The unrolling of the plot is not the driver of the audience's interest or enjoyment, or is so only insofar as the unrolling is pleasurable. And in order to make that unrolling pleasurable, each film engages a theatrical aspect that is itself pleasurable: in *Strictly Ballroom*, it is dance; in *Romeo + Juliet*, it is the Shakespearean language; and in *Moulin Rouge!*, it is song. Logic, or the sustaining of a particular register of address to create a coherent whole (as in most cinema), is less desirable here than elements that might otherwise be seen as disruptive: for instance, a musical number, in all its spectacle, music, and dance. The very things that many audiences may disdain in the musical are exactly what reminds them that they are, in fact, watching a movie: "That is what we have set out to do," says Luhrmann in the *Moulin Rouge!* commentary, "is to take, if you like, that flippant, very, very overt, y'know, silliness is a word to come to mind—but fantastical silliness—and use it to disarm, so that you can actually get access to a very direct emotion." Theatricality is a disruption in the ideally transparent, dreamlike cinematic texture.

Despite the reliance on basic myths as foundational narratives, however, Luhrmann's films do not unfurl in simple linear fashion. He talks about central myths (expression vs. oppression in *Strictly Ballroom*, Orpheus in *Moulin Rouge!*), but with the exception of *Romeo + Juliet,* his films are often mash-ups of a number of different myths—although arguably, Shakespeare's *Romeo + Juliet* was based on a number of different storylines familiar to his Elizabethan audiences, giving it the requisite richness in itself.

The musical mash-up is a concept that goes back at least to the medieval motet, in which two or more related texts are laid over a *cantus firmus*, most often a liturgical, or Gregorian, chant. This chant would be layered with, perhaps, a non-liturgical religious text, and then a popular love song; sometimes, there is a semantic relationship: for instance, a chant on a biblical text referring to the Virgin Mary might be combined with a Marian devotional text, and then a chivalric love song, such that both sacred and secular expressions of love and passion are intertwined. More recently, in the last century, a number of Broadway shows used a similar technique of combining songs: Meredith Willson's *The Music Man* (1957) contains several, including "Piano Lesson"/"Goodnight, My Someone," "Goodnight, Ladies"/"Pick-a-Little, Talk-a-Little," and "Lida Rose"/"Will I Ever Tell You." The two sections of "What Is This Feeling?" in *Wicked* combine to similar effect.

The modern mash-up is a product of the development of inexpensive home recording software that allowed the vocals from one popular recording to be laid over the backing track (or perhaps just the governing riff) of another. Emerging in the early 1990s, these technologically manipulated mash-ups, through their distribution on the internet, reached the mainstream in the early 2000s, parallel to the production of the Red Curtain Trilogy. This contemporaneity seems to speak more to zeitgeist than direct influence.

The narrative mash-up of *Strictly Ballroom*, for instance, engages not only the expression vs. oppression paradigm, but also the ugly duckling, Cinderella, David and Goliath, and the questing sojourner who finds a home in a different land (often via romance, but here also via dance, which are, of course, deeply intertwined). These narratives may have different trajectories, but like contrapuntal music, they have sync points and verticalities, moments where they converge with pleasurable harmony, and in the end, all come together. Even within the specific genre of the Hollywood musical, *Strictly Ballroom* combines the Pygmalion myth that features in so many of Fred Astaire's films,[9] with a typical Gene Kelly storyline of the 1940s, in which the impetuous young man must be socialized into a family. These two arcs are almost diametrically opposed in narrative function, but are both resolved by the central romance, enhanced by the construction of family around the couple. *Moulin Rouge!* similarly blends Orpheus with *La Dame aux Camélias*, *La bohème*, and the historical culture of bohemian Paris c. 1900.

In both films, musical numbers that mark moments of narrative convergence often coincide with the moments of greatest emotional intimacy and impact. In *Strictly Ballroom*, the coming together of Scott and Fran as dance partners, romantic partners, and representatives of divergent dance cultures comes in moments of pulled-back framing, giving us a big picture of intimacy, the exhilaration of movement, the formation of community, and most powerfully, a secret that lies at the heart of the generational story. *Moulin Rouge!* fully embraces the potentially more chaotic mash-up aesthetic, including literally in the music, and in arguably the most affective sequence, uses a similar layering of storytelling in which narrative and music-and-dance are simultaneous, parallel, and rich in mutual implication.

## *STRICTLY BALLROOM* (1991)

*Strictly Ballroom* begins the Red Curtain Trilogy with the opening strains of Johann Strauss's "Blue Danube Waltz" and the drawing back of the eponymous curtain on a group of young ballroom dancers, preparing to enter a competition. The story focuses on Scott Hastings (Paul Mercurio), a successful ballroom dancer who feels stifled by the rules of his "dancesport." After his rebellious showboating loses him his partner, Liz (Gia Carides), his overbearing dance mother Shirley (Pat Thomson) plots with Les (Peter Whitford), her former dance partner who runs the local dance studio, to find Scott an appropriate partner. Fran (Tara Morice), an awkward young woman who's been taking lessons and doing some cleaning around the studio, takes the breakup of Scott and Liz as an opportunity to try to dance with Scott. Fran "has been dancing with a girl for two years"; the implication is that she is not good enough to be paired with a male dancer, because they are always rarer and thus in more demand and likely to be paired with the better female dancers. Scott is shocked that Fran would be so daring as to ask to dance with him—things like that aren't *done* in ballroom circles ("a beginner has no right to approach an open amateur"), so despite his flouting of the rules of the competition, he apparently adheres to some of the rules of etiquette—but she declares him a "gutless wonder" and surprises him with an outburst of Spanish.

He decides to give her a chance, and in perfect Hollywood musical fashion, we see them gradually becoming a dance partnership, and then romantic partners. It turns out that Fran is the daughter of a Spanish immigrant (Antonio Vargas) who runs a bodega down by the railroad tracks, and he will teach Scott flamenco. A parallel side story, told by character narration and one exaggerated, cartoon-like flashback, is the story of Scott's parents, his well-meaning but domineering mother, Shirley, and henpecked father, Doug (Barry Otto)—it turns out that Doug had been like his rebellious son in bucking against Dance Federation rules and it had ruined the Hastings' career, to the point that the children know nothing of their father's dance history. Apropos of Rick

Altman's formulation of a "folk musical,"[10] the pairing of Scott and Fran will bring together two cultural/ethnic groups (British-descended Australians and more recent, othered immigrants), symbolized by the fusion of their dance styles and validated by their popular success at the final competition, even after disqualification.

This celebration of community is given classic expression at the end of the film, as Australian John Paul Young's 1978 hit "Love Is in the Air" plays in the arena where the final dance competition was held. To the buoyant, disco-inflected music, people stream out of the audience onto the dance floor, including many of the dance pairs we have followed throughout the story: competitors, studio-mates, even Scott's little sister Kylie and her juvenile partner, Luke. In a mid-distance shot against a quiet, darker corner of the arena, Scott's reconciled parents dance together for the first time in years in their own little bubble of intimacy. A close-up of Scott and Fran kissing puts a satisfying ending to the main story, and the camera starts to pull back from them, through the dancing crowd. Couples spin across in front of the camera, including familiar couples and new pairings that help braid together the communities that Fran and Scott have brought together, notably Liz and Fran's father, and Les and Fran's grandmother. Rather than merely obscuring Scott and Fran, the intervening couples draw attention to their enclosure in their own little bubble of intimacy, enlivening that space between its borders and the attention of the audience. The camera pulls back and up to show the entire dance floor as the cadential flourish from the "Blue Danube Waltz" swirls up to take over from "Love Is in the Air," and the red velvet curtain that had opened the film falls closed.

## CIRCULAR EXPRESSIONS OF EXHILARATION

The pullback at the end of a dance number is familiar—one of the most famous of all Hollywood musical numbers, "Singin' in the Rain," ends with a long, slow pullback, a soft cinematic ending that contrasts the typical theatrical "big finish," a visual analogue to the fade-out in musical recording that was becoming increasingly popular in the early 1950s. It has become such a recognizable ending gesture that it can also be found at the end of late-night talk shows and local news programs.

But "Singin' in the Rain" also features another, even more affective pullback, at the beginning of the instrumental chorus. Up until that moment, Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) has been dancing along the sidewalk. The camera tracks him walking along a diagonal (the traveling sections, with the angle amplifying the impact of the movement) and at times stops to square him up in the improvised proscenium frame of a store window or front stoop. After balancing carefully along the curb, holding his umbrella aloft as if he were walking a tightrope, Don dips his foot into the water, the splashing growing in intensity until he breaks the plane of the sidewalk, bursting out onto the street to make a huge circle, his umbrella sweeping out ahead of him. The sudden opening up of space, both geographic and choreographic, the addition of brass to the orchestral arrangement, and the swooping (back and curving upward) movement of the camera create an exhilarating, joyous climax, as Don loses all conventional behavioral restraints in celebration of his feeling of love, eventually hopping and stomping in puddles until sheepishly returning to the sidewalk under the disapproving gaze of a policeman.

A similar exhilarating moment occurs in *Strictly Ballroom* in the scene where Fran's father and her grandmother Ya Ya (Armonia Benedito) transform Scott's understanding of dance. The scene takes place on a patio area behind the bodega, alongside the train tracks. Paper lanterns and streamers make the area warm and inviting. Fran's family and gathered Spanish friends are suspicious of Scott at first and laugh at his prancing, superficial ballroom paso doble; her father is dismissive and rises to perform a flamenco paso doble that both intimidates and intrigues Scott.

Ya Ya approaches Scott with a playful sincerity, commenting on his nice body to an embarrassed Fran as she opens his shirt. When Ya Ya asks where he feels the beat, he moves his feet, which just won't do. She claps her hands on his torso, beating out the rhythm against his solar plexus. He nods and follows her lead, gradually feeling the rhythm in his core. The guitarist and *palmeros* pick up the rhythm. A gorgeous gold-embroidered *chaquetilla* (the short jacket from a matador's suit of lights) is brought out for Fran's father, and he engages Scott in a paso doble duel that becomes a teaching tool, building in intensity. As Scott begins to spin joyously with the rhythm, a non-diegetic orchestra joins the diegetic flamenco music, and the camera moves up from his feet to his raised arms (see Figure 23.3a). The flashing of light in the background is revealed to be the light flashing between the cars of a train pulling past (see Figure 23.3b), and a brief shot of Fran laughing, finally relaxed as she feels Scott both understanding the music and dance and being welcomed into her family group, leads to a long shot of the bodega by the curving train tracks of the switchyard. The train's rattling rhythm picks up the rhythm of the flamenco dancers' feet and its curving path transfers the motion of Scott's spin to a larger scale, as if Scott were a cog transferring energy to a larger cog, of which the visible curve is only a small part. The headlights create a lens flare that encircles the patio and dancers in a bubble of warm light, the circle of attention drawn by their coming together in an understanding of the dance (see Figure 23.3c and ▶ Video example 23.3). According to Luhrmann's DVD commentary, the bodega set was built specifically in place for this scene. The effort was worth it. The exhilarating expansion of space heightens the emotion of the moment via kinetic action.

## RUMBA: THE DANCE OF LOVE

The relationship between Scott and Fran is played out with an expansion of space across the film, as the audience is cued to their feelings through the dance. The first time they dance together, Scott reminds her that the "rumba is the dance of love" and that she needs to look at him as if she loves him. Her reaction is a comedic beat, as she looks sharply up at him, so close that their noses almost bump. The close-up of the camera plays up her "ugly duckling" status, with oversized glasses, frizzy hair, and acne-plagued skin (see Figure

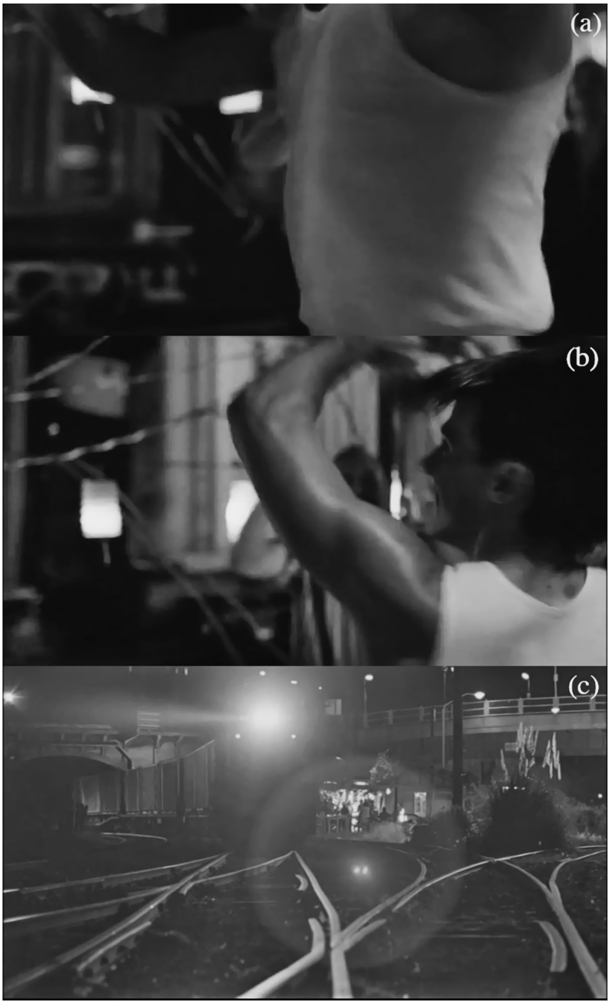

**FIGURE 23.3** (a) Scott whirls in exhilaration on the bodega patio beside the railroad tracks; (b) the train picks up his spinning motion and transfers it into a larger curve; and (c) the train's headlights form a bubble of light and warmth around the joyous dance on the patio.

23.4a), although Scott's earlier admonition that Fran was going to be embarrassed about all this in the morning helps ease any sense that the film, or Scott, is making fun of her.

The midpoint of their romantic and dance development occurs at a competition, and the execution blends both the arc of distance between them and the kind of activation of space that is evident in *Romeo + Juliet* and *Australia*. Scott and Fran had intended to debut their new partnership, while Shirley and Les have planned a surprise for Scott: champion Tina Sparkle's partner is retiring, and she is thus free to partner with Scott. A series of miscommunications leaves a heartbroken Fran bolting and Scott running after her. He catches her backstage as Tina and her partner do their farewell rumba to Doris Day's sultry rendition of "Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps." Scott declares his desire to dance with Fran, and they take up their familiar rumba starting position. Her

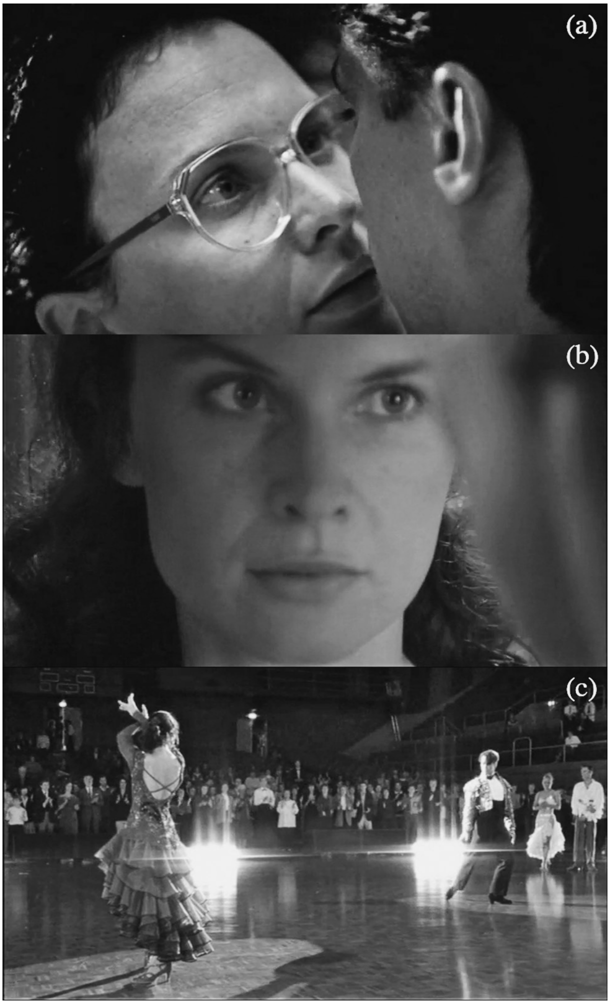

**FIGURE 23.4** (a) Scott says that in order to sell the rumba, Fran must look at him like she loves him; (b) a wary Fran looks at Scott backstage after misunderstanding his intentions to dance with Tina Sparkle; (c) Fran meets Scott's eyes across the dancefloor as they begin their flamenco paso doble.

gaze up at him is now at an appropriate distance, between them and from the camera, a classic, beautiful framing of a romantic dance partnership, and she is a clear-skinned, well-groomed young woman (see Figure 23.4b).

In this rumba, Scott dances Fran through a semi-sheer, natural-colored curtain hung backstage, almost as if breaking through a delicate membrane into their own private space (see Figure 23.5a). On the other side, Tina and her partner, wearing exaggerated costumes festooned with tropical fruit, are dancing a showy number with lifts and floor work, while Scott and Fran dance an elegant "basic" rumba (Figure 23.5b). Their clothes are simple and almost timeless: his black trousers and white shirt are classic, her floral dress a youthful, natural look with enough play in the skirt to emphasize their flowing movement. As they dance, other characters gather around to gape in astonishment, but are held apart from them in the foreground by the vertical of the curtain dividing the frame (see Figure 23.5c). Other, less familiar characters can be seen through the frame of the doorway behind them, the light reminiscent of a seventeenth-century Flemish domestic painting, heightening the sense of intimacy and interiority of the backstage space around them.

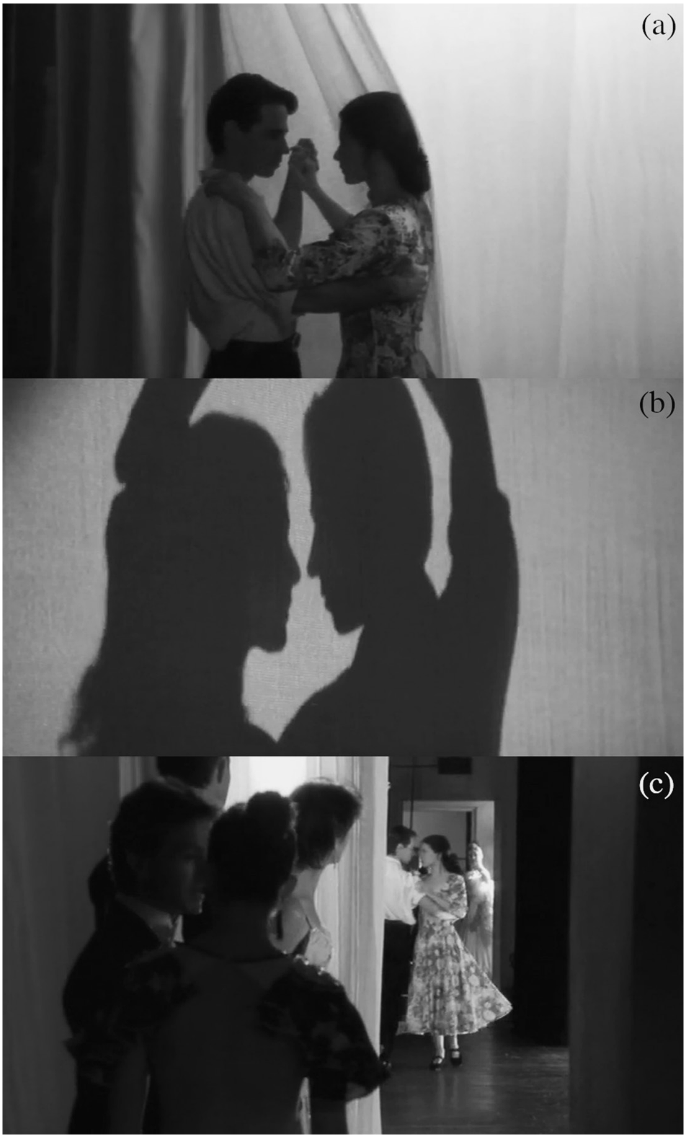

**FIGURE 23.5** (a) Scott dances Fran through the membrane of the muslin curtain; (b) Scott and Fran's classic silhouette is cast against the curtain while Tina Sparkle and her partner dance a highly artificial rumba on the other side; and (c) other characters gather to watch "the not inconsiderable sight" (according to Kylie) of Scott dancing with Fran.

At the end of the film, Scott and Fran begin their flamenco paso doble at the Pan-Pacific competition, even after being disqualified for a late arrival due to missed cues. Their relationship is sealed romantically and choreographically as their eyes meet across the dance floor (see Figure 23.4c). The distance between them amplifies the intensity of their focus, creating a circle of attention between and around them. The ugly duckling is now a glamorous, confident swan in a red-and-gold sequined flounced dress to match her father's gold *chaquetilla* that Scott is wearing; they have become fantasy, the myth that drives Luhrmann's aesthetic.

## "Time after Time"

But the sequence in *Strictly Ballroom* that points most strongly toward what will become Luhrmann's mash-up aesthetic in *Moulin Rouge!* is set to a version of Cyndi Lauper's "Time after Time." Perhaps more akin to a Broadway combination song than a full-blown mash-up, the nearly ten-minute sequence traces Scott and Fran from first encounter in the dance studio to a fluid partnership that ebbs and flows, supported by dreamy montages. Though the song is performed by Tara Morice, there is never any diegetic cue to the relationship between the actress playing Fran and the singer on the apparently non-diegetic track; the boundaries within and around the audiovisual fantastical gap remain tenuous—without the connecting point of Morice's voice, this could be any montage shot to a preexisting recording. The montages are interspersed with small moments of dialogue, like Kylie's acerbic but astute comments on various dancers auditioning to be Scott's new partner, but the major interpolation is another scene altogether as, alone in the dance studio, Doug takes a record from a storage cabinet and places it carefully on the phonograph turntable.

Scott and Fran rehearse their rumba to "Time after Time" on the roof of the studio at sunset, between the rich American/Hollywood glamour of a sparkling red Coca-Cola billboard in the background (see Figure 23.6a) and the mundane Australian reality of a Hill's Hoist rotary clothes line in the foreground. Socks and underclothes hang on the clothesline, rhyming with the streamers and lanterns on the bodega patio. This scene in itself has a grandeur and beauty reminiscent of some classic Hollywood musical numbers, like "Night and Day" from *The Gay Divorcee* (Mark Sandrich, 1934), "Let's Face the Music and Dance" from *Follow the Fleet* (Mark Sandrich, 1936), or even the more intimate, clearly marked make-believe of "You Were Meant for Me" from *Singin' in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952). But then the camera pans down to the window of the darkened dance studio, a single circular spot of light focused on the dark wooden floor, a Stanislavskian circle of attention awaiting a character to inhabit its intimacy. We hear a bouncy piano novelty number accompanied by a samba rhythm in maracas/shaker, and Doug Hastings, with his thick glasses, thinning hair, and awkward paunch, dances into the light (see Figure 23.6b). His movements, like the music, are jerky and disjointed, and yet hang

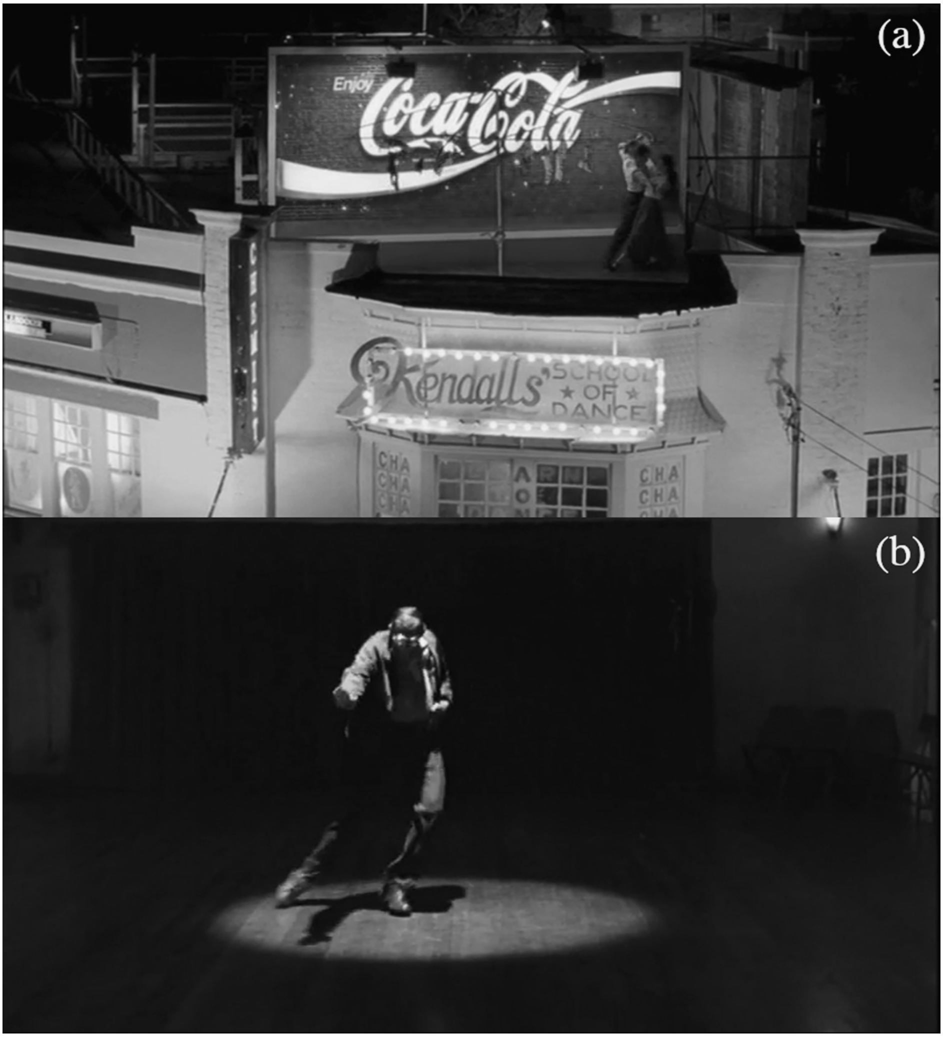

**FIGURE 23.6** The layered dances of "Time After Time" (a) Scott and Fran rehearse their rumba on the roof; (b) Doug dances his eccentric heart out in the studio.

together with a firm sense of rhythmic nuance and inflection. This is clearly "eccentric" dancing, of which there is a rich history; the movements are awkward, but the skill and musicality are significant. This is the first hint of the backstory, that Doug had once been a great dancer, but like Scott, chafed against the rules, destroying his dance career and partnership with Shirley (see ▶ Video example 23.4). Here, in the intimacy of that spotlight, he can dance for himself, and the physical isolation suggests its narrative secrecy for the audience.

As Pam Cook points out, the choice of "Time after Time" for the sequence lyrically engages nostalgia, the fluidity of time, and hints at the generational repetition in the narrative.[11] Musically, the melodic repetition of small, rising motives creates a gentle yearning affect that fits the romantic sensibility of the sequence, as well as a sense of timelessness, like small waves rippling into the distance.

One could imagine smoothing the juxtaposition of Scott and Fran with Doug by continuing "Time after Time" through both narrative threads. However, that would lose the unexpected musicality of Doug's eccentric dancing and risk making him look ridiculous. It is the dance skill, however differently styled, that creates the correlation between Scott and Doug. Although the sequence features parallel editing, long a symbol of similarity and simultaneity, the most breathtaking shots in the sequence are those that pull back, showing us these scenes at a distance, whether it is taking in the small, sinuous crepuscular silhouette of Scott and Fran between the earth and the sky/between the laundry and the Coca-Cola sign, or Doug dancing in and out of the spotlight. The camera never quite pulls back far enough to show them simultaneously, though the pan down from the roof to the window of the dance studio may fool the eye into thinking we are indeed seeing them at the same time, experiencing both timelines at once.

## *MOULIN ROUGE!*

*Moulin Rouge!* arrives in 2001, as mash-up culture is emerging into the mainstream. The visual and musical language of the film is chaotic, particularly in the whirlwind opening sequence in which hero Christian (Ewan MacGregor) reflects on his arrival in Paris to join bohemian culture. The scenes progress in quick succession, as snippets of song (lyrics and music sometimes but not always coinciding) set the scene as well as the film's aesthetic. Because the dominant language that Luhrmann is exploring is song rather than dance, space may not be as obviously central to the affect of *Moulin Rouge!* as it is in *Strictly Ballroom,* but it is still working at key moments throughout the film.

The red curtain opens to reveal the small image of a highly expressive conductor, leading the overture, as the screen behind and above flickers to life with a black-and-white image reminiscent of a Méliès film of the place and time, Paris c. 1900. On the left side of the screen, John Leguizamo (who plays Toulouse-Lautrec in the body of the film, but who might be a different character here) appears as a harlequin in a ruffed costume, looking longingly upward as he sings the opening strains of "Nature Boy," the eden ahbez song first popularized by Nat King Cole in 1948. With its minor mode and descending chromatic lines, the song has an eerie quality, depicting the "strange, enchanted boy" of the lyrics; the arrangement's sustained strings heighten the sense of suspension, of a mythical, "once upon a time" beginning.

Behind the harlequin, the lighted sails of the Moulin Rouge turn, taking up the entire screen, but behind them appears a script roof sign *L'amour*[12] that is seen from Christian's garret throughout the film, and then on the right-hand side, an image of Christian's face, identifying him as the "nature boy," a sharp distinction from the urban maelstrom of Montmartre into which the camera then dives, eventually discovering a sunken-eyed Christian in his garret, beginning to type out the lyrics, including the last couplet "The greatest thing you'll ever learn, is just to love and be loved in return." As the song extends its cadence, Christian's voice enters in voice-over, describing "The Moulin Rouge, a nightclub, a dance hall, and a bordello," as circus-like images of the dancers and impresario Zidler (Jim Broadbent) flash by, both in slow motion and quick edits and dissolves, creating a dreamlike—or nightmarish—flow. A brief, nearly still shot of Nicole Kidman, made up and lit like an anachronistic film noir *femme fatale*, introduces his doomed love affair with Satine.

After this brief moment of stillness, the pace of the film increases throughout the recounting of Christian's arrival in the city to join the bohemian life, and his slapstick introduction to the bohemian crew, including Toulouse-Lautrec and the narcoleptic Unconscious Argentinean (Jacek Koman), and their playmaking. Christian's facility with poetry (or rather, screenwriters Luhrmann and Craig Pearce's facility with lyrics from popular song of the twentieth century) initiates him into their group, and a trip to an absinthe bar later, they fetch up at the Moulin Rouge.

## Planes and Vectors of Movement

The arrival at the nightclub ushers in a distinct change in the use of space. The entire sequence up to this point has been hyperkinetic, both in the acting and the camera-work, which is often uncomfortably close, but the movement is erratic. It takes on specific direction, even a sense of attack, in the mash-up that takes place on the Moulin Rouge dance floor.

A fast-cut, slow-motion sequence sends the bohemians literally tumbling into the nightclub, and an astonished Christian rolls to his feet in the middle of the dance floor. There, he is confronted by Zidler and close-ups of several dancers we will come to know. They sing as a chorus, but individually framed, directly to camera (thus seemingly to Christian), the solicitating, too-direct-to-be-seductive opening line ("Voulez-vous coucher avec moi, ce soir") of Bob Crewe and Kenny Nolan's "Lady Marmalade," made famous in 1974 by the dynamic trio "LaBelle," featuring soul divas Patti LaBelle and Nona Hendryx. In the film (and the accompanying music video in the style of the film), the song is performed by Christina Aguilera, P!nk, Mya, and Li'l Kim and mimed by the dancers.

As the beat kicks in, Zidler leads a phalanx of the dancers across the floor toward/past/through Christian. They ruffle their can-can skirts in front of them. The gesture seems confrontational, even challenging, perhaps an exaggerated recollection of the gesture Agnes de Mille gave to the saloon girls in the *Oklahoma!* dream-ballet to fluster Laurey.

From the opposite end of the floor comes another phalanx. This one is of men in elegant evening dress entering the front door, chanting, "Here we are now, entertain us!" from "Smells Like Teen Spirit" by Nirvana. The men gesture upward diagonally with top hats and silver-tipped walking canes, equal parts Broadway glitz and fascistic militarism, sweeping up Christian and his crew. The two phalanxes march toward each other, physically enacting the musical mash-up in a horizontal intermixing like two countermarching squads of a marching band.

Zidler then calls everything to a halt to announce the can-can. The familiar music from Jacques Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld* joins the mash-up as the dancers move to take over the center of the stage. For the first time, they form circles, facing primarily outward and keeping the predatory men outside their circle while still taunting them with their skirts. This is still a horizontal display of the interaction of groups, but now encapsulated in a complementary rotation/counter-rotation, centrifugal/centripetal motion.

As the dance becomes increasingly chaotic, the interface between the two groups gathers perturbation, until a sudden cessation of movement. A high shot of the elegantly clad men catches silver confetti raining down on them. It is the physical announcement of the "sparkling diamond." Satine descends on a trapeze from the ceiling, swinging in a circle literally above them all. The breaking of the plane, the relentlessly horizontal, floor-level shots of the dancers on the floor disrupted by her arrival, heightens the effect and accentuates her difference.

## BIG SPACE

The two major love song sequences, "Your Song" and the medley of famous lines from love songs that Christian and Satine use to play their argument scene, play out a fantastical spatial arc familiar from many a classical Hollywood film, from "I Only Have Eyes for You" in *Dames* (Busby Berkeley, 1934) to the "Broadway Melody Ballet" number at the climax of *Singin' in the Rain*. Both scenes start in Satine's room in the elephant sculpture in the garden of the Moulin Rouge, then gradually expand into weightless fantasy space above the city, the sky enlivened with sparkles and fireworks, before collapsing back into the confined reality of her boudoir. Both scenes are anchored by Plácido Domingo's voice of the Man in the Moon, soaring over the climaxes of both numbers as an animated moonface (another gesture toward Méliès).

The musical finale likewise is tremendously expansive, but in a distinctly theatrical manner: the number's elaborate space is grounded and defined by the specific geography of a theater. A subplot that winds through the finale is an assassination attempted by the Duke, Christian's wealthy and aristocratic rival for Satine's affections, and his man, Warner. Satine has come from nothing and is determined not live in poverty again, as would certainly result should she continue a liaison with Christian; she is torn, emotionally, but when Zidler tells her of the Duke's threat to kill Christian, she knows she must choose the Duke. This leads to Christian's angry attempt to "pay his whore" and the sometimes slapstick attempts of Zidler and Toulouse-Lautrec to foil the assassin's attempts.

The number begins with an eye-level pushthrough from the front door of the Moulin Rouge, similar to the beginning of the "Lady Marmalade" sequence, but now the nightclub is arranged as a theater with a red velvet curtain. The camera runs up the center aisle to the foot of the stage stairs, and the curtain opens on an elaborate scene, echoing the regress of heart portals from Satine's boudoir in the elephant to tie the "real" and the fantastical together. The Bollywood-flavored number of the big show—the end goal of *Moulin Rouge!* as a show musical[13]—is a mash-up of the popular Hindi film tune "Chamma Chamma" with "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend," Satine's signature number. The number relies relatively little on cinematic spatial construction beyond merely pulling back to get all the stage in the shot, cutting in to catch Satine's fateful cough, or a couple of brief Busby Berkeley shots from above to catch Satine within a circle of male dancers. While an echo of spectacle from classic Hollywood, this also creates a kind of intimate circle of isolation for the dying Satine, because only the audience (or perhaps "heaven above") can see her; for a moment she is invisible to the other characters that inhabit her earthly world.

While the allegorical "Spectacular Spectacular" based on their relationship plays out onstage, the "real" story of Christian and Satine takes place in the wings, the backstage area, even the flies, in a gesture similar to but more ornate than the "Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps" sequence in *Strictly Ballroom*. Eventually, however, the curtain accidentally spills them out onto the stage and the two stories converge, until Christian leaves the stage, heading for the front door. From the stage, Satine begins to sing David Baerwald's "Come What May," an original song representing Satine and Christian's genuine love. Her voice fails and falls into a whisper as he joins in the duet, and the story that had been happening *behind* the stage is now taking place in front of it, as the two lovers meet on the apron. We know from the beginning that Satine will die, but she does so in spectacular, spectacular fashion. Because what good is dying of consumption in c. 1900 bohemian Paris if you can't go out on a great tune at the top of your lungs?

## Upstairs, Downstairs

While the finale is elaborate, it is in its way conventional, both theatrically and cinematically. The narrative lines all come together, while public/private and the real/the allegorical are blended. It is an excellent example of the kind of "audience participation" drama Luhrmann is striving for, in that we know how all the mythology will work out, but the pleasure lies in the execution.

In terms of dramatic tension and use of music/space, however, the "El tango de Roxanne" is a tour de force, and the most thorough realization of the mash-up aesthetic, narratively, musically, and choreographically. The fact that it is an obvious metaphor works in its favor. In this sequence, Satine's submission to the Duke's advances takes place in a neo-Gothic suite of rooms in a tower while Christian and the other performers wait in the dance hall as it is being renovated into a proscenium theater.

Although the spaces are not as directly on top of each other as in the "Time after Time" sequence from *Strictly Ballroom*, the two locations are drawn metaphorically on top of each other through several devices. Verbally, lead dancer Nini's (Caroline O'Connor) crude comments drive home to Christian that the Duke will have Satine first, and then he can "get his end in"; then the Argentinean describes the development of the tango in the brothels of Buenos Aires, reinforcing the suggestion of the rooms upstairs, where the prostitutes entertained their clients. The costume design and blocking helps foster the illusion: while Christian huddles miserably in his overcoat, the dancers are arrayed around the dance floor in their rehearsal clothes—lingerie and corsets for the women, undershirts and braces for the men. The relative *deshabille* of the women and the suggestively empty dance floor coalesce into a suggestion of the brothels in which the tango was born.[14]

The music is "stacked" as well. The Argentinean sings The Police's 1978 hit "Roxanne" (Sting), a song about a prostitute whose lover begs her not to go on the street that night; Christian sings words set by Luhrmann and Pearce to Mariano Mores's classic tango "Tanguera," a title that means a female tango dancer. The combination of the two conflates prostitution and tango dancing for women, an association already deeply ingrained in the dance form's history. The repetitive riff of "El tango de Roxanne" is derived from the first strain of the tango, and Christian's broad melody is from the second.

The tango riff that holds the two songs together is on D, with chromatic decoration both in the bassline and in the solo violin obbligato, and the percussive quality of the piano and roughly bowed strings emphasizes the persistence of the D as a dominant pedal. Both songs are in the expected G minor, although the simple diatonic quality of "Tanguera" is contrasted with the pervasive $^{sus}4$ chords in "Roxanne" that blur the functionality of the harmonies, as does the tilt toward the minor subdominant (Cm). The familiar cry on the title name is on the subdominant (C–G, a root-fifth gesture that further opens up the harmony toward polytonality), and the melodic entry on a C above the pedal D creates a productive harmonic friction. Jacek Koman's exceedingly gruff delivery intensifies the dissonance; it also contrasts with Ewan MacGregor's relatively clear vocal tone. The rhythmic profiles of the two songs are also diametrically opposed. In its original version, the opening cry of "Roxanne" anticipates the downbeat, giving it an unexpected force, then floats freely in triplets and syncopations in a conversational rhythm over the upbeat reggae skanking; in this version, those same irregular rhythms push and pull against the strict tango riff. By contrast, the "Tanguera" melody is in steady, relatively slow motion (half and quarter notes), forcefully articulated on the beat. Both melodies are also marked by a leap upward at the climax of the phrase: in "Roxanne," Sting sings a blue note/tritone, while Koman sings a flat-6th gesture that matches the leap in "Tanguera." In "Roxanne," the leap is to the word "sell" (your body), while on "Tanguera" it is to "heart," both marking the most crucial element of the lyrics for the song's place in the plot (additionally, the lyrics are "heart cry" on a common ^$^{b}$6–^5 sighing motif, engaging in a little word painting).

As a dance, the tango is largely driven by the man and a tension between the couple, whether expressed as longing or resistance. Gestures are sharp and controlled, but often encode violence; in its origins, even the tendency of the woman's feet to work between the man's is dangerous, as the Argentinean gaucho's spurs were more like knives than the rotary stars familiar to Americans. In the "Roxanne" tango, the dance grows from the Argentinean and Nini, to Nini and a gradually increasing number of male partners, until their movements are replicated by other couples filling the dance floor, acting out in choreographic metaphor the increasingly coercive relations between Satine and Duke, intercut rhythmically with the dance.

As the Argentinean begins his narrative of the tango's birth, he gestures toward Nini across the room when he mentions "a prostitute," and after laughing at the gathered dancers' teasing response ("wooo"), she descends the steps to the dance floor to take up a position across from the Argentinean, her hands caressing her own body sensuously. As if they are gunfighters preparing for a shootout, they face off with challenging body language. With a unison stamp, the dance begins, and intercut shots of Christian walking alongside the dance floor and Satine removing her glove before the Duke echo the dancers' movements, circling each other. The distance between Nini and the Argentinean is matched by the distance and angle between Satine and the Duke at opposite ends of a long formal dining table.

The dancers approach each other for the first time with the Argentinean's words "First, there is desire," and a shot of Satine and the Duke on a divan, beginning to kiss, is cut in as the dancers turn around each other in a close position; as is typical of a tango, the man presses forward, causing the woman to step backward before him, though keeping the focus, distance, and bodies tense between them, suggesting resistance on her part. They draw close enough for her to tease a kiss, then turn away. "Then, passion!" he continues, as she spins into him, arm raised as if to slap him, and he catches her upraised wrist on "passion!" (seeFigure 23.7a). The fast spin from her that follows reverses direction and she falls into a lunge against him, gesturing over his shoulder to another man, which leads to "suspicion, jealousy, anger, betrayal," as the dance becomes even more intense. Nini rubs her wrist to indicate real pain as he launches into the song with the first raw "Roxanne," turning to watch her dancing with first one other man, then another, and another, and another. The second iteration of "Roxanne" accompanies her being dragged across the floor and dropped into a deep dip by one of her partners. The Argentinean circles the dancers, watching as he sings, and Nini is lifted and turned in the leap to "sell," a gesture of both elevation and debasement as she seems literally to be offered up to the sky.

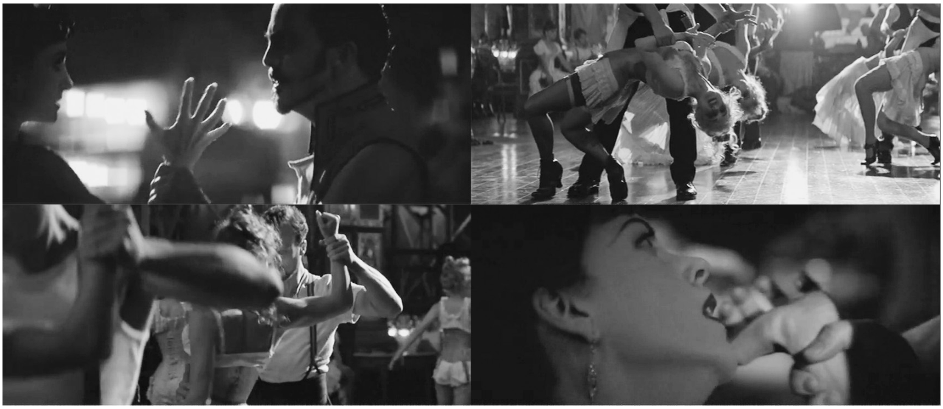

FIGURE 23.7 The repeated gesture of the grasped wrist in the choreography of "El tango de Roxanne" presages the Duke's attack on Satine.

Christian then takes over for his first stanza, with a quick cut-in to the Duke throwing down his napkin and rising to approach Satine, as Christian descends the steps to the dance floor. He explicitly mentions eyes, lips, and skin, suggesting the touches between Satine and the Duke, as Nini and the Argentinean exchange heated, wary glances and another evaded kiss, collapsing the events of the dining room and the dance floor.

The other dancers slowly infiltrate the dance floor, replacing the Argentinean and Nini as they part in opposite directions, looking back with longing glances, and Christian turns to leave at a perpendicular angle, toward the camera as he and the Argentinean now sing their two melodies at the same time. The dancers are arrayed in straight lines, performing their tango choreography with an almost military precision. A deep backbend from the women, anchored by the men holding their upraised wrists, suggests coercion as Christian passes through their ranks (see Figures 23.7b).

The music drops but for the improvisatory solo violin as the Duke begins his seduction of Satine with his words and a spectacular diamond necklace. The dancers circle around each other hesitantly; one of the performers, Le Chocolat (Deobia Operai), quietly slips out a side door. Nini and the Argentinean exchange heated glances across the dance floor, and Christian looks out and upward in the implied direction of the Duke's suite. The tension builds as the Duke's diamonds work their magic on Satine, and he whispers about their fairy tale ending into her ear.

The mash-up version of the two songs returns ferociously in response, a gesture of musical protest and strain. The dancers can still be seen through the windows and open door of the Moulin Rouge as Christian walks out into the courtyard. Fragments of choreography, sharp turns and slow lunges, are cut in to the high, diagonal shot of him approaching the neo-Gothic tower.

The music is suspended on the dominant before the final cadence as he looks up to see Satine on the balcony; in one dancing couple, the man's forehead falls forward onto the woman's shoulder in the breath of silence. A close-up on Satine seems to accentuate the distance between her and Christian physically as she picks up the leading tone for the first note of "Come What May." She half-sings the refrain in a near-whisper, at a volume he could not possibly have heard, but the alternating shots between them give an illusion of intimacy; his disorientation and doubt are illustrated by the turning of the background behind him, in contrast to her certainty in her close-up.

The scene is suspended again for a moment, until she whispers, "No," to the Duke. "No?" he responds in a whisper. "Oh, I see," he continues, watching Christian walk off into the night. As the solo violin re-enters in a tremulous echo of "Come What May," the Duke pushes Satine back into the room, roaring, "Silence!" as he grabs her wrists in an echo of the recurring gesture from the tango choreography (see Figure 23.7c and 23.7d). The violin skitters upward and stutters as we return to the hesitant tango dancers, stilled as Nini and the Argentinean eye each other across the floor.

The musical and editing intensity builds to the reiteration of the cry of "Roxanne" as the Duke rips the necklace from Satine's throat. At the same moment, Christian opens the door to his garret, where he and Satine had spent their happiest times together, singing his melody at the top of his lungs, and Satine clears the dining table in her attempts to escape the Duke, who chases her into the bedroom, intercut with both Christian and the dancers, who echo some of the Duke's violent gestures.

Along with the slow lines of Christian's melody, Nini descends to the dance floor again, stroking her hair and body, as both the Duke's groping of Satine's body and the dancing become more frenetic and violent. Female dancers drop to the floor, scooting backward away from their partners (see Figure 23.8a). The men form a circle around Nini, leaping and turning as she is held aloft in a vertiginous spinning carry, and the Duke rips Satine's dress from her. Cut-ins of Christian and the Argentinean singing seem to be outcries of protest as the Duke pushes Satine down on to the bed and she crawls back toward the head of the bed in the same motion that the female dancers performed across the floor (see Figure 23.8b; ▶ Video example 23.5). Nini is passed roughly from one man to another in the circle, and the Argentinean mimes slitting her throat. Nini falls to the floor in the center of the circle, a shot that foreshadows the overhead "Busby Berkeley" shots of the dying Satine lying in a circle of male dancers in the finale, giving weight to the dainty cough that signals her fatal tuberculosis. At the end of the tango, Satine's eyes fly open in surprise in close-up. Le Chocolat has decked the Duke to rescue her, just in time (see ▶ Video example 23.6).

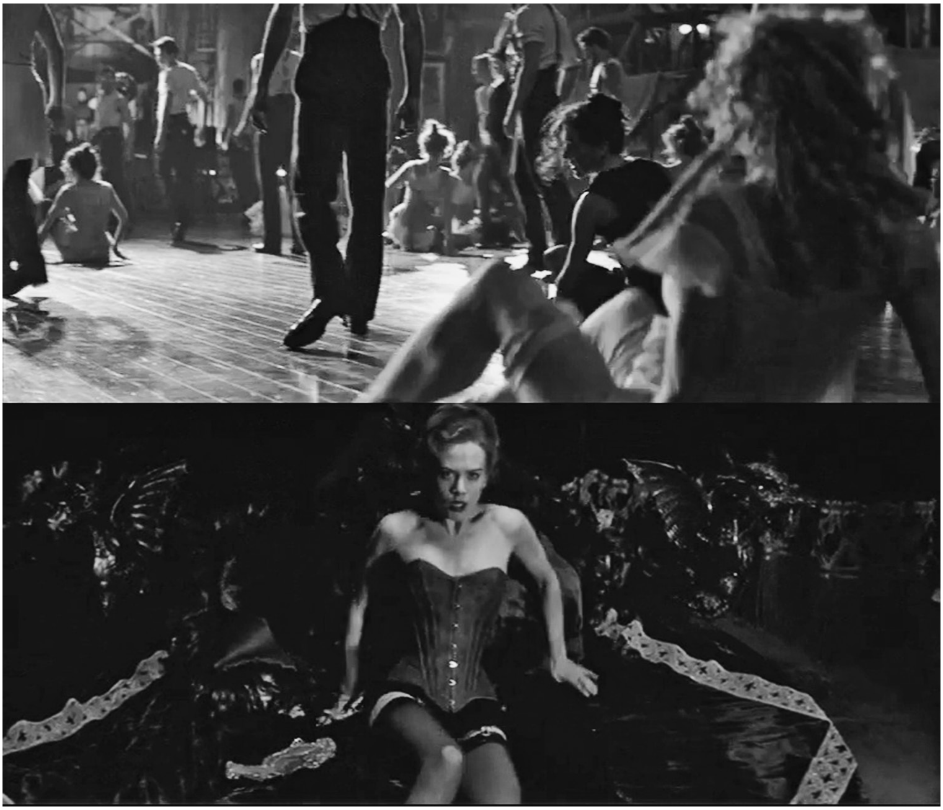

FIGURE 23.8 The female dancers skitter back from their male partners on the floor (a) in a precursor of Satine's attempt to escape the Duke (b).

Dance aestheticizes the interactions between Satine and the Duke; to some extent, it also universalizes it through the replication of gestures, such as the man grabbing the woman's wrist. Because this kind of sexual violence is so familiar, the dance can intensify the gestures through the aestheticization—making them beautiful can make them seem worse through the contrast. At the same time, the dance can suggest more violence than the filmmakers may want or be able to depict graphically onscreen.

The blocking and editing of the sequence works to equate the Argentinean and Nini with the Duke and Satine, with their position and direction of motion consistent across edits. Although the first such sequence seems to frame Christian and Satine, he is gradually excluded, even expelled toward the camera, away from the left-right screen disposition of the two couples. His initial integration makes his expulsion more intense. The use of the multiple couples on the floor between the Argentinean and Nini likewise multiplies their emotion, while enlivening the space between them with roiling motion, as we see in *Romeo + Juliet* and *Australia*, although the emotions are different. And when integrated with the shots of Satine and the Duke, these intervening movements amplify the couples' interactions.

## Space and Affect

Film scholar Dana Polan analogizes Luhrmann's 3D adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* as a "pop-up book" and is ambivalent about the effect. The current state of the technology does not create a sense of depth so much as a series of flat "cardboarded" layers arrayed upon one another, creating a "set of reified tableaux that are paraded out as reminders of noted instances from the original work." On the one hand, this "is not completely inappropriate" as the "cardboarding fits in with this story of insubstantial characters lacking in profundity." But, he argues, this is a problem when the characters who should have weight and depth—Nick and Gatsby—share that flatness; the end result is a film that is "not so much adaptation as taxidermy."[15]

Polan is particularly displeased with what he calls the film's "literally literal" use of Fitzgerald's words, written in script or typed onto the "veritable page" of the surface of the screen. However, I feel a tension between recognizing the cardboarding effect of modern 3D technology and what I experienced watching the film, particularly when text was onscreen. One can quibble with the addition of a story element in which Nick is encouraged to write his experiences as therapy while in a sanitarium (it is not in the book; it is, though, not an outrageous extrapolation). However, I would argue that the text is literalizing the narration only if you think of it as redundant, as words both heard and seen. But they are also shapes in space, making space visible by taking up space and moving through it.

In *The Great Gatsby,* Luhrmann was attempting to create something he called "poetic glue"—"a way of melding, in 3D, picture, idea, words, montage, and opticals, all under one appellation."[16] To some extent, this seems to be naming something that he had been doing for a while, perhaps extending it with the new technology and making it (potentially) literal with the use of Fitzgerald's words. The writing, whether appearing as script or type, activates space between story and audience, a dynamic that has previously been created by choreography between characters in earlier films. The gaze that connects characters from Scott and Fran to Nini and the Argentinean is turned outward, much like the gaze from the optometrist's billboard overlooking the Ashes, the space between the city and the privileged islands of East and West Egg.

In his first film, *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), Luhrmann uses several different strategies to accentuate key moments through space, accompanied by dance. The romance between Scott and Fran proceeds exactly as one would hope and expect in a fairy tale musical (the Ugly Duckling and Cinderella tropes are both fully engaged); but as they grow emotionally closer, the space between them grows in key moments of contact. This distance, marked out by physical choreography, makes us aware of the increasing intimacy by the intensity of the gaze, charging the space between them: the more they are in synch as dancers and in love as characters, essentially, the more space they can set alight with their connection. Space is not emptiness but an activated, electric plasma.

While traces of the enlivened space between characters are discernable in his second film, *Romeo + Juliet*, the technique is expanded, and the intensity of the space between amplified in the Roxanne tango from *Moulin Rouge!* Quasi-militaristic ranks and files of dancers engage the history and typical choreography of the tango to accentuate the violence and sexuality swirling around Satine and the Duke. These main characters are doubled on the dance floor by Nini and the Argentinean who draw together, dance, separate, and draw together again, until she is caught up in a dizzying whirl of dancing men, literally swept off her feet, and he reclaims her by miming her violent murder, converging with the seduction that turns increasingly violent between the Duke and Satine, although Satine is saved through the timely intervention of a minor character. Tellingly for this section of the narrative, the lead character of Christian is driven out of the number in despair into the night, out of the doors through which he entered Satine's life, past the Duke's "lair," back to his miserable artist's garret. And yet, there is that moment of connection in the space between the tower and the theater, as their fragile "Come What May" is transmitted not so much through acoustic vibration in the tenuous physical medium between them, but through the laser-beam emotional connections that pierce the twilit atmosphere.

Music and dance have particular power to mark out and enliven space and time. It is not, then, surprising that this tendency toward "poetic glue" is most obvious and narratively expressive in Luhrmann's films that are overtly musicals. However, this use of affective space can be found in all of his films, whether in the water enveloping the young lovers in *Romeo + Juliet*; in the vast, imposing landscapes of *Australia* that both separate and bind the symbolically representative characters of Lady Sarah, the Drover, and Nullah; or in the flow of words that "glue" together the cardboarded tableaux of *The Great Gatsby* while making us very aware of the space between through meaning and movement. The artifice is used not to conceal but to reveal, like the parting of a theatrical curtain, to draw the audience along while urging us to read ahead.

## NOTES

1. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Complete Works of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (knowledge house, 2019), Kindle location 24361.
2. David Edelstein, "Why I Sort of Liked *The Great Gatsby*," *Vulture*, https://www.vulture.com/2013/05/movie-review-the-great-gatsby.html (originally appeared in *New York Magazine*, May 13, 2013).
3. Lori Burns and Jada Watson, "Spectacle and Intimacy in Live Concert Film: Lyrics, Music, Staging, and Film Mediation in P!nk's Funhouse Tour (2009)," *Music, Sound, and the Moving* Image 7, no. 2 (2013): 109–110.
4. "The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic," in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, ed. Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 184–202.
5. "The Non-Diegetic Fallacy: Film, Music, and Narrative Space," *Music and Letters* 91, no. 2 (2010): 224–244.
6. Although they are pulled apart by the nurse at the end of the aquarium scene, the subsequent most intimate scenes between Romeo and Juliet are the balcony scene and the consummation of their marriage. The first takes place in a pool, the water constantly flowing around them, and the second features constantly billowing white linen sheets; only in their death scene are they together in the same circle of candles and neon crosses that encloses them and holds the audience at a modest distance.
7. There are lyrics to Des'ree's soul ballad "Kissing You" in the *Romeo + Juliet* scene, but the slow, melismatic delivery is of low semantic value; nonetheless, the drawn-out words with their harmonic tensions play out the obvious subtext of the youthful lovers' gaze.
8. Interview included on *Moulin Rouge!* disc of the Red Curtain Trilogy DVD set. (*Red Curtain Trilogy*. 2002. [DVD] Directed by B. Luhrmann. Australia: Twentieth Century–Fox.)
9. Christine Amos Linial examines the "Pygmalion's Domestication of the Hollywood Musical," and about half of the musicals she discusses feature Fred Astaire as the male lead: *Easter Parade* (Charles Walters, 1948), *The Barkleys of Broadway* (Charles Walters, 1949), *Silk Stockings* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1957), and *Funny Face* (Stanley Donen, 1957); *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 68–84. This myth resonates with the transformation of Ginger Rogers into a very good dancer over the course of their RKO cycle of films in the 1930s and is thematized in plot of *The Barkleys of Broadway*; it even lurks in the possibly apocryphal quote by Katharine Hepburn that Rogers gave Astaire sex (appeal), and that he gave her class.
10. Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007): 272–327.
11. *Baz Luhrmann* (London: BFI Publishing/Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 46.
12. This red script sign not only echoes the red Coca-Cola sign in *Strictly Ballroom*, it also appears in Luhrmann's 1990 Australian Opera production of *La bohème* and in the beach set from *Romeo + Juliet*, creating a continuity across the Red Curtain Trilogy.
13. See Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 50–59, 200–272.
14. According to designer Catherine Martin on the DVD commentary, the use of the undergarments was originally occasioned by budget restrictions, but was inspired by a rehearsal scene in Renoir's *French Can-Can* (1955). Since the dancers had to wear period-appropriate undergarments for their other costumes, it was a matter of simple repurposing. By contrast, Nini's fringed black shawl dress with the embroidered roses is a

copy of the dress from the famous Rudolph Valentino tango scene in *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Rex Ingram, 1921), adding a touch of Hollywood.

15. "The 'Great American Novel' as Pop-up Book: Baz Luhrmann's The Great Gatsby," *Adaptation* 6, no. 3 (2013): 397–399, https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apt018.
16. Catherine Martin, DVD commentary, *The Great Gatsby*, directed by Baz Luhrmann (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2013), Blu-ray.

## CHAPTER 24

# MUSICAL TELEVISION

## Smash, *the Backstager, and the Broadway Musical on TV*

JANE FEUER

## Introduction: Reflexivity and Quality Drama

Quality television as an elite form of narrative tends to be self-reflexive, even more so in comedies than in the dramas that are the subject of this chapter. Although the term "self-reflexive" has come to be the standard usage for any type of self-referencing, I would say that the type of allusion to which I'm referring is more "reflexive" than "self-reflexive" in that it does not necessarily call attention to the play of the text itself. There is a tendency to refer outside the text and to use intertextuality or quotation from other texts. Another way of putting it would be to say that in terms of the foundational poetic and theatrical texts in this category from the early twentieth century, it is more T. S. Eliot than Pirandello. *The Sopranos*, for example, uses, quotations from gangster films and actors from *Goodfellas* but these are more intertextual references than true reflexivity; they do not interrupt the realism of the surface text. On the other hand, Lisa Kudrow's comedy *The Comeback* (HBO, 2005, 2014)—about a fading actress who produces a reality show about herself in order to regenerate her career—is reflexive in both directions. Within the text, we are always aware of the cameras filming the reality show inside the show about the actress. Outside the text, the show suggests possible parallels between the fate of Valerie Cherish, the character played by Lisa Kudrow, and Kudrow herself.

When during the first season Valerie is cast in a youth sitcom but winds up playing supporting character "Aunt Sassy," the reference to Kudrow's youthful success in *Friends* draws on a reality that is nevertheless fictional: Lisa Kudrow is *not* Valerie Cherish. She is the co-creator of *The Comeback* on HBO. Within the genre of quality drama, a heightened degree of reflexivity may also draw upon extra-textual references related to the highly authored status of the genre. Thus Aaron Sorkin was responsible for a workplace drama (*Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, 2006–2007) drawing not just upon the real show *Saturday Night Live*, but also presumably upon his own career as one of the leading writer/auteurs of US network television. *Saturday Night Live* and *Studio 60* were both broadcast on NBC where Sorkin had been the showrunner for *The West Wing* from 1999 to 2003.

After the supposedly autobiographical *Studio 60*, he went on to produce another "behind-the-scenes" drama *The Newsroom* (2012–2014) for HBO, thus crossing over from network quality drama to HBO without any difficulty. If anything, *Studio 60* was more reflexive than *The Newsroom* because the internal show was more similar to the one that contained it.[1] The sense that HBO dramas are more open to self-reflexive critique does not seem to be operating in this instance. Of the network-broadcast self-reflexive shows, the closest structurally to *Smash* (NBC, 2012–2013), which is the main focus of this chapter, was *Glee* (2009–2015). Perhaps not a "quality drama," nevertheless this Fox musical television show followed the pattern of the backstage musical in that a theatrical and musical "intertext" was inserted into an outer drama about the production of musical theater by a high school show choir. Moreover, *Glee* could be highly reflexive about its own theatrical and televisual intertexts.

## QUOTATION AND INTERTEXTUALITY: "JUDY GARLAND CHRISTMAS SHOW"

*Glee*'s third season Christmas show, "Extraordinary Merry Christmas" (December 2011), at first seems to fulfill the typical requirements of a Christmas episode for a TV series. *Glee* cast members search for the proper way to celebrate the holiday with options including working at a soup kitchen or putting on a TV Christmas special. In their desire for TV fame, they forget about helping the poor entirely, but in the end, they remember and finish celebrating at the homeless shelter. The frame story is the typical sentimental show about learning the true meaning of Christmas by giving to the poor, but the TV show-within-the-show is polysemic. The *Glee* Holiday Spectacular becomes the internal show in typical backstager fashion and is staged as a campy "spoof" of typical TV Christmas shows. But the internal show also quotes extensively from the 1963 *Judy Garland Show* Christmas episode[2] well known to a cult audience of Judy fans, many of whom identify as queer. The internal *Glee* show is so reliant on the 1963 original that it enables viewers to read *Glee* on two different levels: as a wholesome family show or as a gay camp insider show. Or one could say *Glee* offers itself to two different audiences, one of which includes its producers and the other which offers a compromise to the Fox network and its broader demographics.

Ironically, the *Judy Garland Show* in 1963 took an entertainer who had become a gay icon and tried to recreate her early star image as a wholesome Midwestern girl. With hindsight about Judy's many queer connections, a queer/wholesome dual reading of the 1963 show is also authorized. Whereas *Glee*'s insider queer audience is assumed to be familiar with the queering of Judy Garland, its family audience need not be. The *Glee* spoof is readable as just a tongue-in-cheek parody of old TV Christmas shows or perhaps more widely as a spoof for the *Star Wars* community.[3] But for the insider queer audience, it is much more than that: a subtle parodic commentary on secret queer treasures hidden inside family entertainment. There is thus an inevitable subversive note to the mode of address of the framed TV special ostensibly produced by the *Glee* show choir on a local PBS station.

*Glee*'s address to two such different audiences takes the show outside the definition of quality TV as a type of program that addresses a quality demographic. In an age of narrowcasting, *Glee* is too much of a mass audience show to qualify as "quality"; its subversive appeal to a queer audience puts it more in the category of a melodramatic serial such as *Dynasty* or *Desperate Housewives* than an elite form of entertainment. *Glee* does appeal to a niche audience but within a mass-audience, even family television generic framework. *Glee* is not on Bravo or Logo, it is on Fox, and the demographic appeal follows.

The Christmas "spectacular" uses a much more subtle kind of gay-friendliness than does the *Glee* episode as a whole. In general, *Glee* promotes tolerance of minority groups in a didactic manner. Like old-fashioned TV shows, it teaches us tolerance for diversity. We receive a lesson in how to behave, in this case toward the disabled, racial and sexual minorities, the "other," generally speaking. In this sense, although the content/surface level makes the show progressive, the appeal to specific minority *cultures* is limited. As far as queer culture is concerned, Kurt is a bit campy and outrageous and gay icons such as Barbra and Madonna are lionized on the show, but none of this detracts from *Glee*'s basically wholesome family content. Within a liberal framework, the concept of family is expanded to be more inclusive. The Christmas parody represents something else: it pays homage through intertextuality to an iconic but buried text of gay cultural history, and it does this in the high camp "theatrical" style that used to characterize queer culture (e.g., *La Cage aux Folles*). Inverting *The Wizard of Oz*, it presents a black-and-white flashback within a colored frame.

By 1963, Judy Garland was not exactly the wholesome Betsy Booth character she had played at MGM. The TV show was her second major comeback, and the producers were worried that Judy's image would not appeal to CBS' family audience that had the choice of watching *Bonanza* on NBC at the same time. The network felt that Judy might be too "big" for TV, that she was too nervous and touched her guests too much.[4] At this point her substance abuse and suicide attempts, her multiple marriages, and failed film career were known to the public, although not to the extent that numerous posthumous biographies have made them known today. The queer reading of the *Judy Garland Christmas Show* is largely a retrospective one, now read through our knowledge of Judy's biography.

*Glee* brilliantly reproduces the surface of the original by an uncanny matching of the Garland "family" home so familiar to those Garland fans who know the original. Only the most fannish among us, however, would know that the set for the 1963 show was already a copy of an actual room. Fans who've read the chronicles of the *Judy Garland Show* by Mel Tormé and Coyne Steven Sanders will recall that Judy bought a house on South Rockingham Drive in the Brentwood section of West Los Angeles where she and her children lived during the filming of the show. To increase the family atmosphere of the Christmas show for Judy, CBS built an exact replica of Judy's Rockingham living room as the sole set for the hour.[5] The black-and-white glossy cinematography with its glistening filmic look echoes the original and contrasts with the digital color look of *Glee* in the surrounding frame storylines. *Glee* re-creates the set and re-enacts the camerawork now so familiar to Judy's queer fans. In 1963 the mid-century modern furniture, the guest stars, and the numbers from *Oliver!* rendered the show up-to-date, but in the *Glee* version, and viewing the original today, they render the show camp. The presence of a young gay dancer, introduced to us as Liza's "beau" by Judy, reminds us of the queer object choices both women continued to make.

The *Glee* spectacular camps the already campy opening of the original, which began with an exterior studio shot of snow falling outside a typical family home. Music comes up and an announcer's voice states the name of the show and its sponsors. Judy's children Joey and Lorna come to the window and they sing one of Judy's signature songs—"Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas"—with their adoring mother dressed for the season in a taffeta dress with a fur collar. Judy goes outside and introduces her family to "us." Then daughter Liza enters, pretending to be surprised that "we're on television." This moment is camped in the *Glee* version which shows the gay couple—Kurt and Blaine—also framed in the window of a very similar house with a very similar mid-century modern interior. The set is now "retro," whereas in the original it was simply "modern." The boys do a few old-fashioned dance steps, open the front door, and introduce themselves to us. *Glee* quotes the laugh track from the original show, which now seems quite artificial. Both shows include "messages from our sponsors," another contemporary 1963 usage that has become retro.

Although the 1963 show was meant as wholesome family entertainment, it is now difficult to read it as such since it is now impossible to interpret Judy and her family as "wholesome." Judy's favoring of her son Joey over the more talented Lorna and Liza, her anxiety level, her attempt to enter into a jokey chorus of dancing Santas, the medleys of religious and secular Christmas carols—none of these quite work as sincere family entertainment. A pseudo-familial configuration consisting of singer Jack Jones, Judy, and her children seemed forced then and campy now.[6] When Mel Tormé appears with a chorus of carolers, presumably to lend a neighborly atmosphere, Judy begins to stutter. The "one big happy family atmosphere" is negated for those of us who've read Tormé's nasty book about the making of the show.

Thus the *Glee* "tribute" to the 1963 show is hard to read. Is it an homage, a spoof, a pastiche, a parody? What can the hearty holiday atmosphere mean for the *Glee* cast? When is the *Glee* version taking place? Is it a flashback or just retro? How are we to take the careful, detailed replication of Judy's set that was also Judy's home? This mid-century modern style has become a retro style for gay designers; should we read it as another "queer" cultural reference? Just as the original did, the *Glee* version moves from camp to sentimentality, finishing with the Irish boy giving us the "true spirit of Christmas" by reading from the Bible.[7] This religious gesture does not appear to be satirical, and the internal show is quickly followed by the sentimental *Glee* conclusion when all gather at the homeless shelter wanting to "throw your arms around the world at Christmas time."

Both the wholesome/campy dichotomy of the *Glee* show, and its ambiguous attitude toward the original, give an insider's view for those who can read the intertext. It is almost as if *Glee*'s producers are giving the older gay audience a special Christmas present that is unavailable to the young and the mainstream.[8] Following this episode, *Glee* moved away from queer culture by featuring more and more contemporary pop music and less Broadway. Although Rachel still aimed for a career on the New York stage, her repertoire on *Glee* did not always reflect that. Even the introduction of a transgender character seemed more in line with the show's appeal to diversity than its gestures toward queerness. The appeal to the queer sensibility was fleeting as *Glee* pulled back in the second half of its third season to address the Fox audience instead.

## The Backstager

Quality dramas continue to use diegetic shows. *Mozart in the Jungle* (2014–2018) is about a symphony orchestra, and even *Transparent* (2014–2019) features a drag show performed by the transgender support group. These theatrical performances provide a quite literal theatrical diegesis within the television show frame. I want to explore the ways in which *Smash* (NBC, 2012–2013) was not just "theatrical," it was quite literally *theater* and it took on an afterlife as theater. *Smash* actually evolved into a Broadway musical when the show-within-the-show took on a life of its own.[9] Although some have considered the theatricality of post-*Sopranos* television drama to be historically important as a form of competition for the internet,[10] I have a different ax to grind. For me, the *continuity* of a tradition of the "backstager" is an even more outstanding feature of twentieth- and twenty-first-century popular culture. When I say "backstager," I am referring to narratives that have a theater show within them and not necessarily—but sometimes—texts that travel across media. Thus the backstager was popular on the Broadway stage in the decade prior to its becoming a staple of the Warner Bros. musical in the early 1930s. As I once argued in regard to the Hollywood musical, the film musicals of the 1930s used vaudeville and Broadway revues as intertexts; later musicals had earlier film musicals as the internal show.[11] *Glee* had a 1963 television show within a 2011 television show. Yet the live *theatrical* internal show continued to thrive in theater and in cinema. The compelling nature of live performance persisted as an intertext for film and television long after theater had ceased to be a dominant medium in popular culture.[12]

Considering this long history of texts about "Show Business" and "Show People,"[13] it is not surprising to find a backstage musical being made in 2012. What *is* surprising is that a backstage musical about the production of a *Broadway* show should be made for

US *network television* at this late date. In fact, even film producer Steven Spielberg had trouble selling *Smash* for years before NBC bought it. It was not coincidental that only after Robert Greenblatt—who had been the driving force behind quality drama on the Showtime cable network[14]—became chairman of NBC Entertainment in 2011 did the idea of a contemporary backstager become marketable and even then not very marketable. Robert Greenblatt had been an enormous influence on the development of HBO and Showtime drama at the turn of the twenty-first century. But it was his much smaller role as a Broadway producer and fan that influenced his decision on *Smash*. Thus, two powerful producers from other branches of the world of entertainment put *Smash* on NBC in order to fulfill their personal minority tastes (not the tastes of a mass audience). And that taste was for theater.[15]

As subject matter for a television drama, the behind-the-scenes world of the New York theater was considered a dubious prospect for a network television drama. Just before *Smash* debuted, television critic Jaime Weinman and I discussed this in a newspaper interview. He remarked upon the way the creators of *Smash* were denying its status as a backstager even though he and I agreed this is what it was. Weinman interviewed me about the history of the backstage musical, while stating that audiences are not as energized about them as they used to be.[16] Although narratives about putting on a show were the stuff of popular culture in the 1930s, by 2012 the very idea of Broadway as the subject of a television drama placed *Smash* in the category of elite drama. *Smash* inserted a theatrical diegesis inside the text, but what kind of theatricality did it represent? Perhaps one that no longer resonated for a mass audience? As an NBC show however elite, *Smash* had to appeal to a broader audience than those quality dramas favored by HBO and Showtime.[17] The show faced the challenge of dealing with the evolving cultural status of the Broadway musical from a form of middlebrow mass entertainment to a more highbrow art form at the end of the twentieth century. Broadway alone could not attract a network demographic.[18] Nor could a narrative singly focused on the production of a traditional Broadway musical. *Smash* thus faced the difficult task of importing the backstage musical formula into the serialized narrative form of the quality television drama. As such, it had the task of bringing together two dominant forms of popular entertainment from the twentieth century: the backstager and the soap opera.

How can a long-lived yet end-driven form such as the backstager adapt to the demands of serialized television narrative? The classic backstage musical ends at a precise moment of equilibrium at the very moment of the success of the show and at the celebration of the couple's union in a "wedding kiss." Often—sometimes literally—the final kiss at the end of the internal show becomes the "real" kiss that seals the couple into marriage. Although the couple may have been divided and although previous versions of the show may have failed, this moment freezes in time the ultimate conjunction of the two spheres. No one is supposed to ask at the end of a backstage musical: but what about the reviews? No one is supposed to question the suitability of the couple for one another even though we know they are diametrically opposite in values. The ideal spectator for the classic musical comedy is immersed in the moment of perfect union. Then the film *ends*. Although more deconstructive musicals may take the couple beyond this moment of union, they rarely question the success of the "show," however it may be represented. Even when the musical ends in the death of one member of the couple, as in *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939) and *A Star Is Born* (1954), there is always the sense that "the show must go on." Vernon returns as a ghostly shadow and he and Irene twirl off into the heavens. Vicki Lester goes back on stage to commemorate her status as "Mrs. Norman Maine." Similarly, in the second season of *Smash*, the ghost of its creator Kyle inspires the opening of *Hit List* on Broadway.

The 1930s Warner Bros. musical initiated the formula by which, as Rick Altman puts it, the romantic fate of a pair of young lovers drives the success of a Broadway show.[19] This classic "New Comedy"[20] plot was not taken up by *Smash* until the second season when, in an attempt to appeal to a younger audience, the show created an alternative musical driven by the energy of young love and young talent. The ups and downs of the relationship between Karen and Jimmy[21] are interwoven with the fate of *Hit List*, culminating in the lovers coming together after the successful Broadway premiere of the show. Although *Hit List* was intended as a new-style rock musical, and although the problems suffered by the show included drug addiction and death, its production narrative couldn't have been more classical.

In the classic Hollywood musical the need for the show to go on defines the backstage subgenre. It is thus an extremely end-driven narrative. In the Warner Bros. films of 1933–1934 that solidified this model, the numbers (usually done by Busby Berkeley) clump at the end of the narrative. And yet even some of these do not yet fully equate the success of the show with the formation of the couple who created the show. Altman refers to what now seems an intuitive pairing as the "happy clown" motif, whereby the happiness of the performer is only increased by making the audience happy. But musicals before and after these Warner Bros. musical comedies may also feature what he calls the "sad clown" motif by which the performer must sacrifice his own happiness for that of the audience.[22] Musical *comedy* was thus an achievement won after a period of experimentation and one which could easily be reversed as cycles of musicals fell back upon the sad clown paradigm of musical melodrama. The happy ending is not definitional of backstage musicals. The idea of musical melodrama allows us to envision a possible overlap between the potentially comic backstage formula and that of the television soap opera which is also a type of melodrama.

We need to keep in mind the *flexibility* of the backstage formula which has easily merged with other genres (gangster, biopic) and which lent itself equally to comic and tragic outcomes. Backstager films of 1929—the first full year of sound film production in Hollywood—could culminate in death (*Applause*) or show business failure (*Broadway Melody*). Numerous films from the 1950s onward have questioned the equation between a successful show and a successful life, which is why *A Star Is Born* keeps being remade across decades. Although I've been discussing the backstager as a subgenre of the musical, its dynamic can also be seen in confessional films like Fellini's *8½* (later adapted into the musical *Nine*). The backstager is not even confined to cinema. Many theater pieces of the 1920s took place backstage in a New York theater, for instance, *Broadway*.[23] And the Sondheim musical *Follies* may be the ultimate backstager of all. *Follies* demonstrates the link between art and life, with the Follies standing for our regrets about the past and yet representing the only possible means of transcending failure. Surely the most famous Broadway example of a backstager is *A Chorus Line*, in which the process of auditioning for a show becomes the show we see. Although *Follies* and *A Chorus Line* are quite different from the classic Hollywood backstage musical, all three end with a spectacular theatrical show. *Follies* leaves the reality of its theatrical backstage setting to venture into the dream world of the Follies in which the characters play out their dilemmas in a series of over the top musical numbers.[24] *Chorus Line* ends with the cast merging into the faceless dancers of a Rockettes number at Radio City Music Hall.

It has been argued that the ever-continuing narratives of television have destroyed comedy traditions based on closure.[25] Yet in the cases I am discussing here, moments of temporary closure help to continue the end-oriented pattern of the show musical. Those narrative arcs leading up to the opening of the show are punctuated by mini-closures created by breaking the trajectory of the show's rehearsal and opening into mini-arcs. In a way, this ancient desire for success on "the great white way" provided a Broadway melody for *Smash*. This television version of the backstage musical defers the moment of culmination which the traditional backstage musical achieved in under two hours: the moment of stardom in a Broadway show. Although *Smash* resolved certain narrative arcs and had major mini-resolutions and season-ending episodes, it was not until the show was canceled that any major sense of closure was given, and even then, the internal show *Bombshell* continued to have a life of its own.

According to show creator Theresa Rebeck, each season of *Smash* was initially conceptualized as a mini-backstage musical: "The first season, the plan is to take Marilyn all the way to an out-of-town tryout, so it's her first really public presentation. And then the second season will be Marilyn—if we're lucky enough to get there, would be Marilyn comes to Broadway. How does the show fare in New York?"[26]

Ironically, something like this trajectory did occur after Rebeck was ousted as showrunner for the second season. What she could not predict was the way in which *Bombshell* would be removed from the central focus of the narrative in the second season. The narrative strategy for the second season settled into a dual-focus split between *Bombshell* and *Hit List*, siphoning off the young, hip pop crowd from the traditional Broadway group producing *Bombshell*. *Smash* started to look like a D. W. Griffith movie with so much cross-cutting between the two shows that *Bombshell* no longer seemed central to the backstage plot.

And yet it was *Bombshell* not *Hit List* that emerged as an independent text after *Smash* had left the airwaves. *Smash* started out in the usual manner, with a few numbers being rehearsed and then premiered from the internal show *Bombshell*. It was almost unheard of to have a complete score written for the internal show in a musical, much less two scores.[27] Yet after *Smash* ceased to exist as a television show, the complete "Broadway" cast album of *Bombshell* was released as a recording (written by the *Hairspray* team of Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman). This was followed by the onetime Broadway semi-staged show (June 8, 2015) that galvanized the fans of the original TV series and featured the complete score, summarized in the "cast album" released by NBC. The summary of

*Bombshell* that accompanied the CD release contained a complete synopsis and the full score of a show that had only appeared in fragments on the TV show. Thus it took a live theatrical play to fulfill the expectations and desires of the television audience's most devoted fans. The internet buzz around the *Bombshell* premiere was fierce, with audience members lucky enough to get to see the New York premiere scrambling to post photos and clips on the internet, clips whose amateurish quality only made them more eagerly anticipated. Actress Meghan Hilty, who played Ivy (and Marilyn), posted a number of video clips on her website. *Bombshell* had become a celebration of theater for its most devoted audience, with the television show and its vicissitudes now only a memory.

## *SMASH* AND QUALITY DRAMA

Even within the first season of *Smash*, there are dual trajectories with moments of closure. The initial narrative arc leads up to Ivy's debut in the workshop version of what is eventually titled *Bombshell*, the musical about Marilyn Monroe. But the subsequent portion of season one unravels this temporary closure. By casting a movie star in the Marilyn role and then ending with the understudy's surprise debut in the show's Boston opening, the path of the backstage musical film is taken twice in the first season alone. The moments of resolution parallel the backstage musical formula,[28] but the fact that the resolutions only introduce further complications is pure soap opera.

The use of mini-resolutions shows us just how indebted the narrative structure of *Smash* (indeed of most television quality dramas) really is to the now dying form of the daytime soap opera. Although much has been made of the soap opera's lack of closure, in fact, the soaps were always structured into story arcs that ended in the mini-resolution of one thread at the same time as others continued to unfold. The debt of all serialized television drama to the daytime soap opera's *narrative* formula cannot be stressed too much. Regardless of whether a primetime serialized drama is "quality drama" or not, it tends to follow the pattern of narrative arcs leading to temporary moments of closure. Television's overall flow has long required both segmentation and closure. In this way, *Smash* repeated the putting on a show plot over and over again until the series finally ended as the result of cancellation.[29]

Rebeck told journalists that she thought of *Smash* as a workplace comedy like *West Wing* not as a backstage musical. In stating this in interviews, she was trying to separate her show from old-fashioned entertainment practices and place it in the category of quality drama. Perhaps she believed that *Smash* is not a backstage musical because most of the original songs are performed either as part of the show-within-the-show, or as fantasy sequences where the characters imagine themselves performing. Presumably this lends the show an aura of greater realism without the silly transitions to song and dance that marked the old-fashioned musical film. But if one takes into account the entire history of the backstager as an entertainment form, not only is *Smash* a quintessential example, but it even could be considered a clichéd usage of the backstage formula. It is also a quintessential soap opera containing multiple melodramatic storylines, a paradigm for which it was widely criticized by both audiences and critics at the end of its first season. And yet the musical numbers are enhanced by gathering into their montages characters from storylines other than the production of the show, those behind-the-scenes romantic episodes that nevertheless return to haunt the show's going on.

For narratives with open endings, plotting cannot be end-driven. The authors simply don't know how long the program will last and thus when and how it will end. Soap opera narrative is traditionally driven by introducing new backstories, that is, inventing new past events. This is one of the reasons soaps are viewed as having ridiculous plots and unrealistic timelines. Children crop up from characters' pasts, they age rapidly, old characters return from the dead. In *Smash*, a backstory plot occurs when Broadway diva Bernadette Peters turns up on the show as Ivy's mother. Earlier it was hinted that Ivy came from a tougher, more urban background than Karen. Now it suddenly turns out that her mother is a famous Broadway star whose fame certainly should have been able to pull more strings for Ivy. The writers use the maternal storyline to establish that Ivy is an unloved, needy child. This in turn links her to Marilyn and provides her with yet more reasons for becoming Marilyn. So although the sudden introduction of a history for Ivy is unmotivated, its integration into the overall storyline of *Smash* makes sense. A number of reviews of the show criticized this device, but such a critique is based on norms derived from end-oriented narratives. For soap opera narration, I believe we must accept the convention of introducing a character's backstory as the main narrative unfolds. We should ask not "is this realistic?" but rather, "does this work to deepen the thematic development of the text?" In this case, I believe it does because it justifies Ivy's descent into the out of control emotional world of Marilyn. So much is done to establish the idea that Ivy *is* Marilyn, that to me the most unrealistic narrative event has to be giving the Boston premiere to Karen. But it is not my goal to establish the realism or lack of it of *Smash.* Rather, I wish to shed light on the interaction between the soap-based narration of quality drama and the end-oriented pattern of the backstager.

What kind of show should one put on for a backstage musical? Let's look at *Marilyn/Bombshell.* Marilyn Monroe remains a mass-audience icon many years after her death. Her life story has become an American folk legend. Hundreds of books about her have been published with no end in sight, and she continues to be the subject of films and TV movies.[30] The signature events of Marilyn's life are well known to audiences of all ages. *Bombshell* is what in movies would have been called an entertainer biopic. The show is used on *Smash* constantly to point out parallels between Marilyn's tragic life and the lives of the show folks who are driven to make the show succeed. In their comments in the booklet accompanying the CD, "Marc and Scott" explain that the songs had to tell the story of Marilyn *and* the stories of the backstage characters: "We always tried to write . . . lyrics that applied to two stories at once." The example they give is a song sung by Arthur Miller in *Bombshell*, "The Right Regrets," which could also express Julia's feelings about what has happened to her marriage and friendships.[31] *Bombshell* is a Broadway musical with an old-fashioned integrated Broadway score and stage-oriented numbers. The backstage narrative provides an insider look into the "real" Broadway scene. It appeals to a cult audience of fans who prefer a Broadway score to the isolated lyrics of pop music, an audience who would rather watch the Tony Awards than *American Idol*. This is a "quality demographic" that has emerged as the Broadway show shifted from a form of mass entertainment that was expected to produce hit songs to a more esoteric middlebrow and even elite art form. The elite Broadway audience relishes the insider tidbits that *Smash* offers us and waits patiently for Karen to stop singing pop tunes and for the show to go on. As Emily Nussbaum writes in the *New Yorker*, "McPhee has a pretty pop voice, but she plays every scene with a Splenda-flavored neutrality, which might not rankle so much if the show didn't keep insisting that Karen is a star whom everyone adores."[32]

Although I don't agree with Nussbaum's conclusion ("If only I didn't have to watch *Smash* to get scraps of *Bombshell*"), I too identify with a minority "cult" audience of Broadway "show queens." I believe that the most compelling dichotomy *Smash* sets up for its audience is the war between pop and Broadway singing on the show. *Smash* was made by writers/producers who have a deep love of musical theater and a deep knowledge of the history of entertainment. Yet the television audience is also deeply knowledgeable about pop singing as its own art form from watching *American Idol* and presumably learning how to judge pop singing.[33] The majority of numbers in *Smash* come from the pop/country/rock repertoire including all the diegetic songs sung by Karen. When Karen tries to be Marilyn and sing the Broadway score written for the show-within-the-show, she appears to the show-queen audience to be deficient, especially in contrast to Ivy's rendition of the same songs. This is exacerbated by the unusual happenstance that both women sing the same onstage numbers and that they sing them over and over again. So that even though the actress who plays Karen is more popular and perhaps more telegenic, she comes across to the cult audience as innately second best. It is almost as if you have two audiences rooting for different teams. In fact, the *Smash* website emphasized this when they invited fans to take the Karen vs. Ivy quiz on NBC.com to find out if they were on Team Ivy or Team Karen. The entire second season is structured around this possibility of a mass audience identification with Karen surrounding a cult audience identification with Ivy. The second season takes this dichotomous identification even further by splitting the stars into two separate shows: the off-Broadway edgy rock musical *Hit List* for Karen and *Bombshell* for Ivy.

This strategy of dual identifications structured into the text can be signified by different musical styles or by different musical sensibilities. Even the choreography for Karen's show in Season Two expresses a younger and more contemporary aesthetic. In these backstager TV shows, musical performance is used to stratify the audience into different taste publics.[34]

## *Smash* Numbers: Broadway vs. Pop

Although *Smash* tends not to use traditional diegetic numbers, the types of number that the show does employ have a long history in musical theater and film. Rehearsal numbers and numbers that represent a character's fantasy have long provided an opportunity for reducing the distance between narrative and number. The rehearsal number is of course a staple of the backstage musical that typically moves from rehearsals of the show to the opening of the show on the Great White Way. For the "show" musical, achieving verisimilitude has always been easier than in the "folk" or "fairy tale" subgenres because professional performers have many more opportunities to sing and dance than do farmers or Ruritanian royals. Classic films also use diegetic numbers that take place offstage and that narrate the film. This type of diegetic number no longer seems to work, and a number of alternatives have been offered to make diegetic numbers more acceptable to the post-1960s film audience. Many films have taken the path of using diegetic dancing with a song over it, as in the numerous teen musicals familiar to the MTV video audience. A film like *Moulin Rouge!* renders the entire film so unreal and spectacular that even people singing and dancing their way through life seems relatively normal. *Smash* uses the fantasy number that projects a character's internal image of performance into a diegetic world to accomplish this task, motivating diegetic numbers as the inner fantasies of the characters.

This is especially necessary for *Smash* because the serialized narratives are structured so much like a daytime serial that breaking into song would indeed prove disruptive. In its first season, *Smash* used the rehearsal studio set as its main location, transitioning from that set to various imagined versions of a staged show that we the audience don't get to see realized until the final episode when the show opens in Boston. Both seasons made frequent use of the song over a montage sequence, often taking a number from one of the shows and playing it behind a series of images of the soap opera characters. The second season was more experimental with the numbers, even using semi-diegetic numbers as when Jimmy sings with his doppelganger in Episode 14.

The numbers in *Smash* may not be filmed like a traditional musical film, but in numerous other ways they are mired in tradition. Early musicals (c. 1929–1933) relied on rehearsal numbers to provide opportunities for song and dance but also to create desire for the show to come. Many of these films repeated the same number throughout the rehearsal process. During this period, it was common for the ultimate shows to be filmed in color, even when the rehearsal sequences were black and white. This was part of the hermeneutic code whose purpose was to create the anticipation of an ending. According to Rick Altman, the achievement of this ending in film musicals does not go in a straight line. Rather, scenes are set up in dual-focus, contrasting the male half of the couple with the female. *Smash* observes this practice by putting into dual focus Ivy's and Karen's scenes, Ivy's and Karen's numbers. Early episodes use the dual-focus narrative to contrast Karen's innocence with Ivy's experience. The pilot episode opens in medias res with Karen dressed in a ridiculous childlike costume singing "Over the Rainbow" on stage. The *mise-en-scène* here as elsewhere makes a distinction between onstage performances and diegetic on- or offstage ones. The number's referent could hardly be missed by any audience and the opening emphasizes the Kansas/Oz dichotomy of the original film. Then Karen's cell phone rings to bring her back to the "reality" of her audition. We next see Ivy confidently approaching her audition. The pilot episode alternates scenes from each girl's *Marilyn* audition process. As Ivy records the "National Pastime" number, Karen has dinner with her parents. After Ellis posts on the internet Ivy's rendition of the song written for Marilyn, we see Karen watching Ivy's recording on her computer and singing along. The episode follows this dual-focus pattern whether the scene is from the backstage scenario or from the soap opera one. A pointed example occurs in the first diegetic rendition of "Let Me Be Your Star."[35] As Karen emerges from the shower and sings to herself in a mirror, we cut to a parallel scene with Ivy preparing for the audition. Ivy's singing continues over their journey to the studio and becomes a kind of voice-over diegetic duet as they arrive simultaneously. The visual motif of looking into one's own soul through mirrors has a long history in the film melodrama. Fantasy diegesis and dream diegesis is also a longtime practice of Hollywood musicals.[36] For *Smash*, the show is the dream of the characters in the soap opera plot. These "flash forwards" to *Bombshell* in its full staging give the audience a taste of the dreams of the characters and allow us to compare Karen and Ivy in the role of Marilyn. Even more so than representing some inner fantasy of the characters, the view of the fully staged show is addressed to the audience to tell us that what we are seeing now is just a preview of the show to come. In most musicals, the fully staged show in its entirety never comes. In the 1930s Warner Bros. musicals, for instance, the rehearsal numbers morph into the cinematic Busby Berkeley spectacles we see at the end of the film. For *Smash*, the fully staged show never comes either, but with the full score and the semi-staged performance, *Smash* fans can still hope it will. But the show we long to see will be *Bombshell* not *Smash*.

*Smash* likes to take its musical performance from the diegetic to the performative and back again. Classic musicals did this, but not so often as more contemporary films influenced by music videos. But what *Smash* does that is absolutely classical is to use the numbers to set up the Team Ivy/Team Karen identification process. Since the narrative is so much more drawn out than in a musical film, it is not until the ninth episode "Hell on Earth" that an actual duet occurs between the two women when they sing the Rihanna number "Cheers (Drink to That)" in Times Square.

Instead we see a dual-focus duet *within* the show when Marilyn sings "Mr. and Mrs. Smith" with Joe DiMaggio. This number is repeated perhaps more than any other number in *Smash*. It represents a quintessential "folksy" Broadway number in which Marilyn and Joe sit in front of a white picket fence and imagine being just ordinary folks. The song and the number occur firmly within the "Broadway" portion of *Smash*'s music. Although it's an original song, we feel that we have seen it before—perhaps in a musical with lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II[37]—but not on *American Idol*. The number is performed in Episode Three as the songwriters sing a bit of it at the piano and then Ivy and Michael rehearse it.

The number transforms from playing over Karen visiting with her parents on their Iowa porch to playing over Julia's revelation of her affair with the actor who plays Joe DiMaggio. We then see the number onstage in a final production that will become the debut of *Bombshell* with Karen in the role in Episode 15. The rendition of the number so early in the narrative links together the onstage, offstage, and backstage worlds of the show. It links the soap opera plot of Julia's affair to Marilyn's doomed relationship with Joe DiMaggio, implying that Julia's marriage will be equally doomed. It links Karen's wholesome background to Marilyn's desire for a Midwestern family life, perhaps foreshadowing Karen's greater suitability for the role. Curiously, "Mr. and Mrs. Smith" is not among the numbers Ivy performs at the workshop premiere of the show. Yet it becomes crucial to Karen's Boston opening. As Karen rehearses the number in Boston after it is revealed to us that she will play Marilyn, the camera moves up over the light board to reveal Karen and Michael on the set we've until now seen only in the imaginary. This is followed by a scene between Julia and Michael on the same set, as Julia's husband flips on the lights to reveal them together. Once again, Karen is associated with "Mrs. Smith," but Julia is associated with Marilyn's failure to become Mrs. Smith.

The conclusion to the first season of *Smash* ends with the debut of the show on the road, a premiere that we are led to believe—as in conventional backstage musicals—has been a success. The Boston episodes remind us of the way Cyd Charisse and Fred Astaire sit on the stairs to the mezzanine during the New Haven rehearsals of the first, disastrous *Band Wagon* just as Julia and Tom do as they try to finish *Bombshell* during its disastrous out-of-town rehearsal. The search for the "true" Marilyn is resolved when Karen debuts in the part and when Julia's lyric for the final song is finally presented to the diegetic audience and to us. Moreover, it appears that the show has created a new couple, not Karen and Dev but rather Karen and Derek. In a line indebted to *42nd Street*, Derek tells Karen that she is a star and that he does understand love. Ivy's apparent overdose in the dressing room echoes the tragic fate of Helen Morgan in *Applause*. The idea that Karen "goes out an amateur but comes back a star" is one of the oldest lines in backstage history. In short, the first season finale of *Smash* brings to television the entire history of the backstage musical, clichés and all. One could say that *Smash* ends with the triumph of television as a medium over both theater and film. Only on television can we have a long-running soap opera that culminates in a successful theatrical show.[38]

## CONCLUSION: QUALITY DRAMA AS THEATER

This essay has attempted to trace shifting definitions of theatricality through the genre of quality drama, a genre that is also televisual and cinematic. And yet television began as a means of showing theater plays to that elite audience who could afford television sets. And so my survey ends with the curious development that on June 8, 2015, 1,700 theatergoers were fortunate to buy tickets to the semi-staged presentation of a Broadway show that originated as the show-within-the-show on a backstage musical on NBC that an audience of 11.4 million was fortunate to watch for free in exchange for exposing themselves to advertising.

The television audience included adults 18–49 who were affluent and well-educated but little known to the producers. The audience for the theater play, on the other hand, consisted of zealous New York theatergoers who were happy to contribute to a charity event for the Actors' Fund. A populist celebration, many in the audience had their cell phones on so that the folks on YouTube could hear the score and see miniature representations of *Bombshell* taken from the twentieth row of the orchestra, representations that were not cinematic and not televisual either and that were often obscured by the heads of audience members in the next row. I should know—I watched a YouTube of the entire show taken by one of these fans on my phone just prior to writing this. Returning to television's origins, but with a participatory twist, *Bombshell* was an event no one could have anticipated. Theatricality, I hope to have shown, structured the genre of quality drama as I have constructed its boundaries and traced its shifting meanings. But *Smash* was something even more than the theatrical: it was theater at every level.

## NOTES

1. Apparently a cult of Twitter "haters" has been inspired by this show's autobiographical "posturing." Emily Nussbaum writes, "Like 'Smash,' 'Studio 60' was a show that people loved to hate-watch, because it was bad in a truly spectacular way—you could learn something from it, about self-righteous TV speechifying and failed satire and the dangers of letting a brilliant showrunner like Sorkin run loose to settle all his grudges in fictional form." Emily Nussbaum, "Hate-Watching *Smash*," *New Yorker*, April 27, 2012.
2. It is also an "homage" to the 1978 *Star Wars Holiday Special*, a two-hour made-for-TV movie that would involve yet another cult audience. I will not be discussing the *Star Wars* appeal here.
3. Indeed, a recap of the episode in *Rolling Stone* does not even mention the Judy Garland show and only tangentially refers to *Star Wars*. Erica Futterman, "Glee Recap: Have an 'Extraordinary Merry Christmas': Annual Holiday Episode Pays Homage to 'Star Wars,' Black and White Christmas Specials," December 14, 2011, http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/glee-recap-have-an-extraordinary-merry-christmas-20111214.
4. Mel Tormé, *The Other Side of the Rainbow: With Judy Garland on the Dawn Patrol* (New York: William Morrow, 1970).
5. Coyne Steven Sanders, *Rainbow's End: The Judy Garland Show* (New York, Kensington, 1990), 291.
6. This is not just my interpretation. In her blog, *Christmas TV History*, Joanna Wilson writes, "Despite her professional demeanor, Judy really seems to be uncomfortable, at times appearing to be forcing the Christmas spirit. She seems distracted and fidgety, not really focused during the entire show. And later, tension can be felt when Garland sits at the piano to sing with Tormé the song so synonymous with the holiday that it's often overlooked that Tormé himself co-wrote it—'The Christmas Song.' Harmonizing along side the 'Velvet Fog,' Judy accidentally flubs a line and Tormé reacts jovially, laughing and making the aside comment, "Close. . . ." But there is clearly some friction when Judy purposefully alters the next line to add a lyric from her signature tune "Over the Rainbow" on top of his masterpiece. The first lyric change was a mistake but she's clearly manipulated the lyrics vengefully the second time." http://www.christmastvhistory.com/2011/12/glee-extraordinary-merry-christmas-2011.html, December 13, 2011.

7. Linus recites the same Bible passage in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Read more: http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/glee-recap-have-an-extraordinary-merry-christmas-20111214#ixzz209JxEOOL.
8. According to blogger John Kubiek: "But my question is: Who was this for? Do *Glee* fans even know who Judy Garland is? Are the writers of this show under some delusion that everyone who watches *Glee* is a gay man in his 50s? Because that seems to be the target demo of this black-and-white special." Buddy TV blog, Dec. 13, 2011. "Glee" Recap: An Absurd, Judy Garland Christmas Special."
9. Quoting *Variety*, "the show-within-the-show became the show on June 8, 2015, when the cast of *NBC* series 'Smash' reunited to present a song-and-dance concert version of 'Bombshell,' the musical whose road to Broadway was depicted in the TV series." Gordon Cox, "*Smash* Cast Reunites for *Bombshell* on Broadway," June 8, 2015.
10. See Abigail de Kosnik, "Drama Is the Cure for Gossip: Television's Turn to Theatricality in a Time of Media Transition," *Modern Drama* 53, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 370–389.
11. Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), chap. 5.
12. As Philip Auslander has written: "The prospectus for a conference entitled 'Why Theatre: Choices for the New Century' posed a question that goes straight to the heart of the matter that concerns me here: 'Theatre and the media: rivals or partners?' My own answer to this question is unequivocal: at the level of cultural economy, theatre (and live performance generally) and the mass media are rivals, not partners. Neither are they equal rivals: it is absolutely clear that our current cultural formation is saturated with, and dominated by, mass media representations in general, and television in particular." Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).
13. To quote two numbers from the Broadway shows *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946) and *Curtains* (2007). *Show People* was also the title of a 1928 Marion Davies film about a young actress trying to break into the film business.
14. From his bio on Comcast: "Bob was most recently President of Entertainment for Showtime Networks Inc., where he supervised a slate of original programming that dramatically altered the Showtime brand and repositioned the company as a leader in premium cable television. Over his seven-year tenure the audience subscription base increased 52%—to a record high of 19 million subscribers—and profitability soared an incredible 97%. He was responsible for such seminal hit series as *Weeds*, *Dexter*, *Nurse Jackie*, *The Tudors*, *Californication*, *United States of Tara*, *The Big C*, *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, *This American Life*, *Penn & Teller: Bullshit!* and *Tracey Ullman's State of the Union*, among others." Earlier he had produced *Six Feet Under* for HBO.
15. According to one source, "Critically acclaimed director Steven Spielberg has revealed that he spent five years trying to bring his new TV drama 'SMASH' to the small screen because the concept failed to win over network executives. According to 'Access Hollywood,' despite Spielberg's power in Hollywood, it took years to persuade TV executives to take on the show—until NBC entertainment boss Bob Greenblatt agreed to commission the series. 'I came up with the idea for the series. I'd been flogging it for about five years. It took Bob Greenblatt to step forward, because he's done musical theatre with 9 to 5. He really responded to the material,' the Daily Express quoted him as saying. 'I couldn't get anybody else to buy it. Bob stepped forward and took the show for NBC. So, I hired myself and my . . . two TV partners at DreamWorks Television. . . . We then hired Theresa Rebeck to really create the show. She wrote a wonderful play called, The Understudy. She had done a

lot of writing for theatre and I wanted theatre. I wanted writers from theatre to write about theatre,' he added." See "Spielberg Struggled to Sell Smash," *Daily Express*, January 17, 2012, https://www.express.co.uk/celebrity-news/296286/Spielberg-struggled-to-sell-Smash.

16. Jaime Weinman, "Broadway Revival: With Smash, NBC Is Betting That Audiences Are Still Fascinated by the Backstage Antics of Theatre People," *Maclean's*, February 6, 2012, 54–55.
17. Some Showtime dramas had very low ratings indeed. For example, the first season finale of *Huff* (Showtime, 2004–2006) drew only 462,000 viewers—and that was the season high. A Showtime "hit," *The L Word* drew about three times that according to then Showtime president Robert Greenblatt. *Smash*, on the other hand, started out with 11.4 million total viewers and a 3.8 rating in the adults 18–49 demographic. but already by its second episode, Smash had fallen to 8.06 million viewers and a 2.8 rating. By January of its second season, Smash was drawing only a 0.9 rating.
18. The following statistics are given in "The Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2013–2014": 68 percent of the audiences were female; the average age of the Broadway theatregoer was forty-four years; almost 80 percent of all tickets were purchased by Caucasian theatregoers; Broadway theatergoers were quite affluent compared to the general U population, reporting an average annual household income of $201,500; of theatregoers over twenty-five years old, 78 percent had completed college and 39 percent had earned a graduate degree.
19. Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 270.
20. Northrop Frye uses this term in *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 44.
21. The name is perhaps an ironic reference to Dick Powell's character in *Dames* (1934).
22. Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 228.
23. The 1926 play by George Abbott and Philip Dunning takes place entirely backstage at a Follies-type show and includes a gangster narrative. In a 2004 revival (Pittsburgh Public Theater, dir. Ted Pappas), the onstage show could be heard offstage but not seen throughout.
24. *Follies* does come back to "reality" after this show, but the characters' fates remain ambiguous.
25. David Grote, *The End of Comedy: The Sit-Com and the Comedic Tradition* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1983).
26. Louis Peltzman, "Preview: NBC's *Smash*, Which Is Now Streaming Online," http://www.tv.com/, January 23, 2012.
27. Even *Kiss Me, Kate* merely alludes to and samples from the Shakespeare play. The internal show in *Follies* is not a unified text.
28. Note that the more deconstructive backstage musicals such as *The Band Wagon* (1953) often take the show up to its point of failure and then re-establish the classic happy ending as the show opens on Broadway and the couple comes together at last.
29. Second season showrunner Josh Safron stated that he had planned a third season in which the cast would produce a Hollywood musical. See https://ew.com/article/2013/05/26/smash-finale-exec-producer-josh-safran/.
30. As of 2015, 1,165 biographies and memoirs were listed on Amazon.com.
31. "A writer has the empty page where he can set the scene / He puts the actors on the stage or on the movie screen." and "But when the writer steps outside that room where he is king/ he can't control when lives collide or what the lovers sing"
32. Nussbaum, ibid.

33. Indeed, *Smash* star Katharine McPhee gained fame in May 2006 as the runner-up on the fifth season of *American Idol*.
34. Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1999). Gans suggests that we can construct aggregates of individuals who make similar aesthetic choices in the realm of taste (taste publics).
35. The CD has an "extended intro" of both women singing this number.
36. See Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, chap. 4.
37. "The Folks Who Live on the Hill," the Kern/Hammerstein number from the 1937 film *High, Wide and Handsome* comes immediately to mind. The motif of itinerant entertainers wanting to settle down in the country or in a small cottage runs throughout the backstage musical film. It is the other side to the glorification of entertainment that predominates in the film musical.
38. On March 22, 2012, NBC renewed *Smash* for a fifteen-episode second season. However, showrunner Theresa Rebeck "stepped down" in favor of former *Gossip Girl* showrunner Josh Safran.

## CHAPTER 25

# THE VIRTUOSIC CAMERA

## *Nostalgia, Technology, and the Contemporary Hollywood Musical*

### HANNAH LEWIS

When *La La Land* premiered in 2016, critics praised the film for "mak[ing] musicals matter again"[1] and predicted it would usher in a resurgence of the genre. It is a love letter to the art form, paying nostalgic homage to such classics as *Singin' in the Rain*, *West Side Story*, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, and the Astaire-Rogers films of the 1930s. In interviews, director Damien Chazelle and composer Justin Hurwitz have pointed out the many references in *La La Land*'s music, narrative, sets, costumes, and cinematic style to specific Hollywood films from the "Golden Age" of the 1930s to 1950s. It offered audiences a chance to relish in one of Hollywood's most cheerful, celebratory genres and disappear momentarily into the escapist pleasures of onscreen singing and dancing. For example, in the film's stunning opening number "Another Day of Sun," a traffic jam on the Los Angeles freeway spontaneously evolves into an ebullient and virtuosic ensemble performance. The scene fulfills many of the functions of a classic opening number: it establishes setting, community, and a world where characters express themselves through song. Impressively, the scene appears to be filmed in a single take, the extended traveling shot a feat of cinematic virtuosity that leaves spectators thinking, "How did they *do* that?" A year later, *The Greatest Showman* became the fifth highest grossing musical of all time, following on *La La Land*'s heels in its commercial success and trend of paying homage to the classics of the genre.

Yet, there is something fundamentally different about the musical numbers in these films from those in the earlier films that they attempt to emulate, particularly regarding the films' audiovisual syntax and their relationship between technology and performing onscreen bodies. These recent films have had to contend with a broader "problem" facing the film musical today: how to reconcile nostalgic impulses with contemporary cinematic style? Technology has always played an important role in the movie musical, particularly in distinguishing it stylistically from its stage counterpart. But in recent film musicals, I argue, technological virtuosity—what I call the "virtuosic camera"—often overshadows human virtuosity, giving camerawork and editing style a privileged role over the performing bodies onscreen.

This essay interrogates the aesthetic and cultural implications of the contemporary film musical's audiovisual style, which began in 2001 with the release of *Moulin Rouge!* and crystallized in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Its approach to technology can in part be understood as part of a broader stylistic trend in Hollywood films that features rapid editing, fragmentation, and free-ranging camerawork. It also, I argue, suggests that contemporary directors are unwilling to accept virtuosic singing and dancing on its own terms, brought on by a general discomfort of the emotional excess of singing and dancing onscreen. I demonstrate how the virtuosic camera often undercuts the very nostalgia films like *La La Land* and *The Greatest Showman* attempt to engender. I also comment on how the recent trends of film adaptations of stage musicals and live-action remakes of animated films attempt to walk the line between nostalgia and contemporary technology. I conclude with a brief discussion of how technology and human virtuosity are presented differently—perhaps more earnestly—in children's films. My analysis shows how the contemporary film musical reflects current anxieties about the relationship between human expression and technological virtuosity.

## Nostalgia, Technology, and the Hollywood Musical

Nostalgia has been a feature of film musicals since the beginning of the genre. Developing out of the stage musical following the introduction of synchronized sound technology, the Hollywood musical of the 1930s frequently referenced older theatrical forms like vaudeville and minstrelsy. Musical films sentimentally evoked stage genres while engaging in modern cinematic technologies, nostalgia serving to connect audiences to the familiar elements of human performance in live genres while habituating them to the technological cutting edge. Golden Age film musicals frequently referenced Broadway, through show-within-a-show tropes and other techniques, as a means of highlighting the human virtuosity required in the performance of musical numbers. Though synchronized sound could displace the actor in time and space, it was important for audiences to forget that fact in order to become fully absorbed in the spectacle and accept the utopian American values that film musicals espoused. As a frequently reflexive genre, the film musical also often referenced Hollywood itself, self-consciously dialoguing with the genre's past in its own medium, another means of connecting the past and the present through nostalgia.[2]

Technological intervention, too, has always been present in film musicals—from dubbing and post-synchronization, to editing together multiple takes of a complex dance number. Yet in film musicals of the Golden Age and even beyond, these technologies were typically rendered “transparent,” to foreground the virtuosity of singing and dancing bodies and create a utopian world onscreen.[3] Fred Astaire famously wanted his dance numbers to be filmed in wide shots and long takes; he purportedly once said, “Either the camera will dance, or I will.”[4] A classic Hollywood tactic was to make highly calculated and rehearsed numbers seem natural and unplanned, like the song “The Man That Got Away” in *A Star Is Born* (1954), when Judy Garland is handed sheet music to a new song and seems to suddenly know all the words. In one of the most famous examples of movie musical technological trickery, Gene Kelly’s iconic performance in the title song from *Singin’ in the Rain* featured fake rain on a studio set resembling a Los Angeles street, and required multiple takes shot over several days, all supposedly while Kelly was sick with a fever (or so the myth goes), in order to depict an impromptu exuberance that leads his character to sing and dance with abandon.[5] Though a product of intense behind-the-scenes labor, this scene appears to be a spontaneous expression of joy, a chance to show off Kelly’s singular talent.

Even in numbers where the technological intervention was front and center, technological virtuosity was almost always presented to further highlight human virtuosity—a means of celebrating the magic of the movies alongside its most talented stars. As such, the numbers always bring the focus back to the virtuosity of the performer. Some of the most famous examples include Astaire’s ceiling dance in *Royal Wedding* (1951), which involved a complex rotating set to make it appear as if he was dancing on the walls and ceiling; his flying sequence in “Seeing’s Believing” in *The Belle of New York* (1952), where he floats in the air, appears to dance precariously atop the Washington Square arch, and then suddenly weightlessly dances alongside it; and Kelly’s dance with animated partner Jerry of *Tom and Jerry* in *Anchors Aweigh* (1945), where real man and drawn mouse seamlessly respond to each other’s movements. These kinds of numbers reflexively highlight cinematic technology not to “distanciate” the spectator in a Brechtian manner, but, instead, according to Jane Feuer, as a means of “remystification” of performance and celebration of community onscreen, ultimately reifying the film musical as entertainment.[6] *Singin’ in the Rain* is perhaps the most well-known example of this: the film seemingly pulls back the curtain on the process of dubbing, only to conceal its own participation in the very practice. These uses of technology helped establish the musical numbers as special, fantastical utopic spaces, places where seemingly superhuman feats, enabled through technology, helped convey very human emotions.[7]

## Intensified Continuity and the Resurgence of the Film Musical

This relationship between the Hollywood musical genre, film technology, and audiovisual narrative style shifted after the Golden Age. Almost since the genre’s beginnings, the film musical has been seen as a genre in decline, in need of resurrection.[8] The musical's unabashed embrace of fantasy worlds where characters burst into spontaneous song and dance became increasingly challenging for filmmakers to reconcile with technological developments and evolving cinematic expectations of realism. As Raymond Knapp has pointed out, the 1960s and 1970s marked a particularly fraught moment for the film musical, as "new standards and rationales for filmic realism" developed and filmmakers struggled to position musical numbers within a domain of realism. Knapp suggests, "in creating a specifically filmic sense of reality, film adaptations of musicals often foreclosed a central function of their songs, which, rather than establishing the 'real,' often appeared as artificial intrusions within the realities established according to more basic filmic conventions."[9] With the rapid changes in Hollywood's studio system and cinematic style in the 1960s, film musicals had to adapt their style to be perceived as relevant. Kelly Kessler has also pointed out that social and cinematic developments of the 1960s made it increasingly difficult for filmmakers and audiences to embrace the utopian world of the film musical, resulting in more ambivalent narratives.[10] The social unrest of the 1960s and subsequent cynicism of the 1970s and 1980s made the nostalgic project of the film musical sit uncomfortably with Hollywood's ever-changing cinematic priorities. Furthermore, the 1980s marked, according to John Muir, the "beginning of the blockbuster era when book musicals couldn't compete."[11]

But since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Hollywood has seen a resurgence of the movie musical genre, kicked off by the massive successes of *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) and *Chicago* (2002) in close succession.[12] The critical and audience receptions of these two films opened the floodgates: soon after, a number of Broadway stage musicals were adapted for the screen, with some notable examples including *Phantom of the Opera* (2004), *Rent* (2005), *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007), *Les Misérables* (2012), *Into the Woods* (2014), and *Cats* (2019). The trend of adapting stage musicals for the screen continues; in 2021, the film adaptations of *In the Heights* and *West Side Story* both received widespread critical acclaim. Jukebox musicals, or musicals featuring existing popular songs, have also been popular, including films like *Across the Universe* (2007) and *Rocketman* (2019), as well as *Moulin Rouge!* The 2007 film musical *Enchanted* was a different kind of adaptation: a parody and homage to Disney animated fairy tales, it featured both classic-style animation and contemporary-set live-action sequences. Since the mid-2010s, another trend has emerged: that of the Disney live-action remake of animated films from the Disney Renaissance of the 1990s, including *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), *Aladdin* (2019), and *The Lion King* (2019).[13] *La La Land* and *The Greatest Showman* have perhaps signaled something new for the genre, as both were completely original screenplays, not based on an existing stage production or film, with newly composed songs written specifically for each.

All these films seem to signal a renaissance for the Hollywood musical, but with distinctly twenty-first-century sensibilities—the content is often darker and more realist, much in the same way that Broadway stage musicals have dealt with heavier subject matters in recent decades. Likewise, the audiovisual style of the film musical has shifted to reflect the technological advances and resulting stylistic evolution of contemporary cinema. At the same time, because film musicals in the twenty-first century remain relatively rare compared to other genres, each time a new musical is produced, it automatically enters a discourse about its break with or continuation of the genre's traditions. As a result, nostalgia for Golden Age Hollywood musicals is almost always on display, whether intentional or not. As cinema entered a new technological era, both original film musicals and adaptations have contended in different ways with nostalgia, referencing older forms and styles while also relying on new technology and contemporary cinematic techniques to update the genre and make it feel relevant to contemporary audiences.

But the incorporation of contemporary cinematic techniques has resulted in fundamental changes to the genre. In musicals produced since 2000, technological virtuosity often purposefully and overtly overshadows human virtuosity, camerawork taking precedence over the coherent presentation of performing bodies. This shift is part of contemporary Hollywood's broader trend toward a new kind of audiovisual syntax that Carol Vernallis calls "accelerated aesthetics," a new presentation of "forms of space, time, and rhythm" in contemporary cinema and digital media.[14] David Bordwell calls this stylistic shift "intensified continuity," a visual style that involves fast cutting, fragmentation of the body in rapid edits, bipolar extremes of lens length, close framings in dialogue scenes, and a free-ranging camera.[15] When there are longer takes, according to Bordwell, "the camera is usually in motion," often creating "virtuoso shots" that track a character moving along a lengthy path.[16] Contemporary Hollywood cinema also frequently incorporates CGI (computer-generated imagery), blurring the line between animation and live action and creating humanly impossible visual effects. Some scholars have even suggested that a whole new "postclassical" style emerged toward the end of the twentieth century, a distinct break from the narrative-driven classical Hollywood, perhaps most exemplified in recent blockbuster action films. As Geoff King suggests, blockbusters are designed to be spectacular, and rapid editing and camera movement have "become important sources of heightened spectacular impact in contemporary Hollywood," designed to create an impression of "subjective immersion in the action."[17] The rapid, disorienting postmodern editing style of MTV music videos has also influenced the new approaches to musical numbers in narrative feature films.[18]

When incorporated into the aesthetic of the film musical, the audiovisual syntax of intensified continuity and accelerated aesthetics fragments the singing and dancing body, de-emphasizing the virtuosity of individual performers in the process. Indeed, the fragmentation of the performing body in the contemporary Hollywood musical is so pervasive that it seems to signal a broader phenomenon at play: a discomfort with the display of singing and dancing on screen. The cinematography attempts to mitigate the affective impact of musical performances, a cynicism that reflects an unwillingness to accept virtuosic singing and dancing on its own terms. Instead, alternating between the hyperrealism of long traveling shots and the fragmented aesthetic of the music video, the virtuosic *camera* becomes the star, resting only briefly on the requisite singers or dancers in any given musical number.

*Moulin Rouge!* was the first film musical to overtly experiment with many of these audiovisual features of intensified continuity. Director Baz Luhrmann's postmodern, hyperrealistic style was very new at the time, and the cinematography as a result brazenly drew attention to itself.[19] In drawing on preexisting popular music, the songs in *Moulin Rouge!* did not emulate classic Hollywood musical style. Instead, the popular songs were remixed and rearranged in a manner that fit closely with the film's visual style, placing its lineage as much in the MTV music video tradition of the 1980s as it did in that of the film musical. As a self-conscious element of the film's storytelling, the virtuosic camera was a means of brashly exposing the artificiality of the film musical genre. Many films have since adopted aspects of *Moulin Rouge!*'s visual style, but without the same kind of self-conscious reflexivity, resulting in an uneasy tension between their nostalgic projects and their technological virtuosity. This tension plays out in a number of contemporary Hollywood films, but perhaps most clearly in the two most successful original musical screenplays of the 2010s, *La La Land* and *The Greatest Showman*.

## *La La Land* (2016) and the Virtuosic Camera

*La La Land* has been embraced for its nostalgia, as a throwback to bygone Hollywood. Nostalgia, defined by media scholar Svetlana Boym as "a sentiment of loss and displacement, but . . . also a romance with one's own fantasy,"[20] drives the motivations of the lead characters. The film follows the romance of hopeful actress Mia (played by Emma Stone) and jazz pianist Sebastian (played by Ryan Gosling) as they both pursue their dreams. Ultimately, they must choose their careers or their relationship, and they amicably part ways. Mia becomes a successful actress and Seb opens up a thriving jazz club. However, in a final poignant dream ballet sequence, we see what could have been if they had stayed together.[21] Throughout the film, both Mia and Seb contend with their own nostalgia for old-fashioned art forms: Sebastian for mid-century jazz that he laments has been largely forgotten, and Mia for a classic Hollywood style that contemporary Hollywood seems to discount, as she attends an endless series of discouraging auditions.

Yet the film's narrative also exhibits ambivalence about its relationship to nostalgia. As Anthony Carew claims, the film suggests that being in love with old-fashioned art forms can become a "kind of blinkered nostalgia."[22] When Seb agrees to play in a jazz fusion band with his former classmate Keith (John Legend), he feels that he is "selling out"; but his obsession with musical authenticity is itself painted as inauthentic (indeed, the film has gone under scrutiny for framing Seb as the "savior" of jazz).[23] Seb and Mia ultimately sacrifice their relationship to each pursue their dream, a poignant ending that denies audiences the old-fashioned love story expected in earlier musicals and suggests that these kinds of happy endings cannot be fully realized in today's world. Because the narrative itself sends somewhat contradictory messages about its nostalgic project, it is difficult to pin down what message the film is really sending, what point it is trying to make about nostalgia in the contemporary world.

The *form* of the film, on the other hand, in its use of singing and dancing to tell the story, *seems* to embrace nostalgia wholeheartedly, in its blatant stylistic and narrative references to older films. Still, certain aspects of performance and cinematography undercut this embrace. The score's highly polished compositional style emulates the style of movie musical songs of the 1950s and 1960s, but it is incongruously paired with the more contemporary vocal styles of the actors. Moreover, Stone and Gosling are inexperienced singers and dancers, and their untrained voices result in understated performances on the part of the leading couple that lack the typical exuberance and virtuosity of classic Hollywood musical numbers. Every time expectations are built up for a transcendent musical moment, it is not the actors who deliver with exciting singing and dancing; instead, the spectacular effect of the film's musical moments is enlivened through the virtuosity of the camerawork and effects.

Returning to the opening number "Another Day of Sun," for instance, we can see the virtuosic camera on full display. Critic A. O. Scott suggests that the number is "the movie's way of auditioning for the audience, testing our tolerance for a bold blend of nostalgia and novelty . . . Can a generation raised on 'Glee' and the 'High School Musical' franchise besotted by newfangled stage musicals like 'Book of Mormon' and 'Hamilton' find room in its heart for a movie that unabashedly evokes 'The Young Girls of Rochefort' and 'An American in Paris'?"[24] Technology abounds in this number: in a final stunning visual, we see what appears to be hundreds of dancers standing on their cars doing the same choreography down to the end of the freeway entrance. In reality, there were only thirty dancers in the scene; CGI was used to fill in the rest of the dancers. Perhaps more significant, this scene is a quintessential example of what Bordwell calls a "virtuoso shot," filmed to appear as if it is done in a single take, and requiring untold stamina, and a little bit of luck, from its large ensemble cast of singers and dancers. But cinematic sleight of hand was used to create the virtuosic camera effect in this scene: in reality, three carefully timed whip-pans allowed for seamless cutting of three distinct shots. In an interview, choreographer Mandy Moore suggested that "we knew we needed to create movement that would inform an edit," and she shaped the choreography around these whip-pans.[25] Though choreographers for stage and screen have always had to consider the constraints of their medium—from issues of space and visibility onstage to the framing of the camera—Moore's comment indicates that the virtuoso traveling shot was the primary structuring focus of the scene, a self-conscious display of the creative team's technological prowess.

This use of the virtuosic camera to capture mass movement does have precedent in the elaborate choreographic sequences of Busby Berkeley's films of the 1930s. Berkeley's numbers often brazenly exploited the camera to create seemingly impossible angles and shapes with his chorus girls. Pamela Robertson suggests that Berkeley "offers a purely cinematic vision of entertainment in which the camera itself dances and the spectator identifies with its movements, rather than with characters who sing and dance."[26] The earlier example of Berkeley's choreography is instructive. Berkeley's choreography has been interpreted in a number of ways: as commentary on industrialization, as an extravagance offered as an escapist antidote to the hardship of the Great Depression, and as feminist camp, for instance.[27] Just like Berkeley's numbers, in "Another Day of Sun," the big-picture sequence takes precedence over the showcasing of any of the individuals onscreen. What differentiates this number from the Busby Berkeley numbers is that it seems to offer the *promise* of individual opportunities to shine—instead of being dressed uniformly, each character brings a different costume, personality, and singing voice to the table. But each performer is given very brief screen time to feature their singing or dancing before the camera moves on to the next person, and we frequently do not see the person's whole body, just a portion of it, the camera dancing more than the characters, even as they perform their individualized choreography (Figures 25.1a–f; ▶ Video example 25.1). As a result, the virtuoso shot becomes the most memorable aspect of the scene's movement, causing the individuality of each performer to be glossed over.

The downplaying of human virtuosity in favor of the virtuosic camera is also apparent in the leading couple's duet at the Griffith Observatory. In this scene, the couple dances together to symbolize how they have finally fallen in love. Just as Fred Astaire and Vera-Ellen floated above the buildings at the end of *The Belle of New York*, which revealed their feelings of love for each other, Seb and Mia float effortlessly off the ground to dance among the stars. Yet, the moment their dance (literally) gets off the ground, the CGI effects take over, and remain the focus of the scene as they float in the air. The couple's synchronized movements remain simple and understated. In contrast with the 1930s dance duets of Astaire and Rogers, who are seen as a perfect match in their films because of how seamlessly they dance together, Mia and Seb's romance requires digital special effects to unite the couple in dance, perhaps an early sign that the two are destined not to end up together.[28] The scene's editing style—the fact that CGI must be used to artificially bring the couple together—belies its own nostalgia for romantic courtship symbolized through dance.

One major exception to this approach in the film is Mia's solo number, "Audition (The Fools Who Dream)." Though the virtuosic camera is still active, it is used in tandem with Stone's performance, to different effect. This number is a raw, heartfelt, intensely personal number that reveals Mia's acting abilities and leads her to land a part in a movie that jump-starts her career as a successful actress. The two casting directors sit behind a table and ask her to tell them a story. She begins to describe her aunt, who once jumped in the Seine when she was in Paris. She quotes her aunt, who encourages people who chase their dreams, no matter how foolish: "Here's to the ones who dream / Foolish as they may seem / Here's to the hearts that ache / Here's to the mess we make." The audition room and casting directors seem to disappear as the room fades to black, with only Mia illuminated. She begins telling her story, then slowly transitions to singing, at first a cappella. A piano enters underneath, and the accompaniment slowly builds up as the orchestra joins and the song builds in intensity. Visually, the song is filmed in one continuous take, beginning with a very slow zoom into a close-up of Mia's face, then a slow arc shot around her, and concluding with a slow zoom out. As the song concludes, the audition room comes back into focus, and we see the backs of the casting directors watching her performance. Emma Stone's vocals were not post-synchronized, but rather

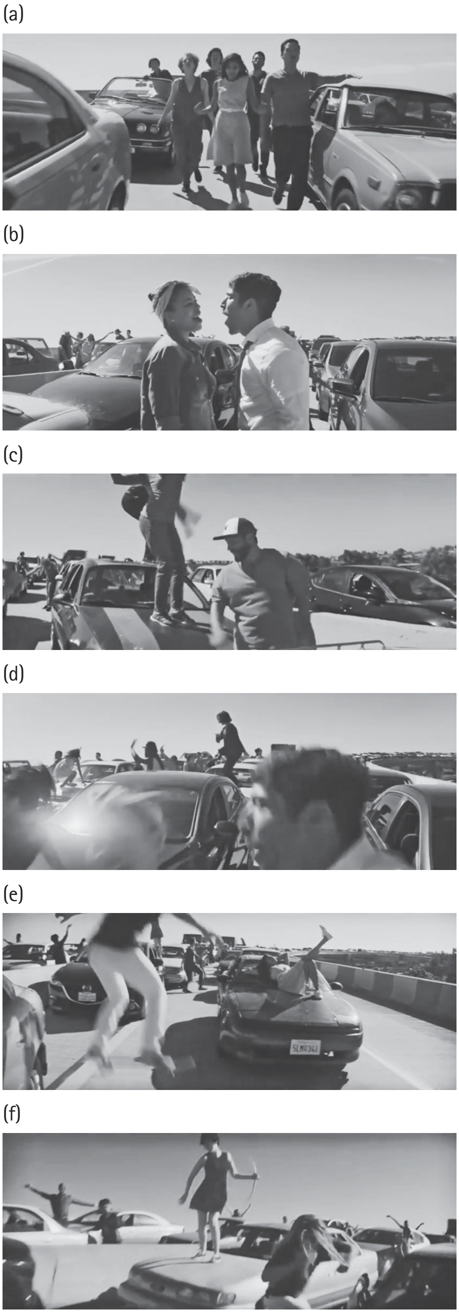

**FIGURE 25.1A–F** Fragmentation of the Body in “Another Day of Sun,” *La La Land* (2016)

they were recorded live on set to composer Justin Hurwitz's piano accompaniment.[29] Though the camerawork is impressive, it is clearly designed to highlight the virtuosity of Stone's performance—that of her singing, but more notably, her acting. This number, unlike most others in the film, incorporates technology at the service of displaying raw, human emotion. It is the exception that proves the rule for *La La Land*, revealing an alternative means of combining contemporary audiovisual technology and the presentation of singing onscreen, one that does not shy away from earnest musical expression.

The audiovisual style of Mia's audition song is not emulated in any of the film's other songs. In fact, the creative team seemed genuinely uncomfortable with the most crucial element that comprises a film musical: the musical numbers. Director Damien Chazelle once admitted that "at some point—I don't mean all at once—but we tried at different points cutting every [musical] number from the movie."[30] Though the film's creative team was working hard to make sure each number aided the story telling, this fact perhaps also indicates their overall discomfort with how to best present singing and dancing onscreen. Indeed, throughout the film, the camera frequently moves around rather than staying fixed for any period of time on any musician or performer. Instead, the creative team relies on stunning visual feats of technology, an approach often at odds with the very human message of Mia's heartfelt audition song.

## *The Greatest Showman* (2017)

Whereas *La La Land* featured untrained singers and dancers, *The Greatest Showman*, based on the life of P. T. Barnum, starred veteran song-and-dance man Hugh Jackman. Critical reviews of the film were mixed at best, some critics calling it a "shrill blast of nothing," "all smoke and mirrors, no substance," a "whirlwind of musical, visual, and narrative artifice," or criticizing the film's failure to depict a more honest portrayal of Barnum.[31] Nevertheless, it was a monumental box-office success. *The Greatest Showman* is less ambivalent than *La La Land* about its nostalgia; Brent Lang calls it "unabashedly nostalgic": "Whereas 'La La Land' was grounded in a darker realism, this film is bright and ebullient, infused with a let's-put-on-a-show spirit that's been largely missing from cinema since the days of Judy Garland and Gene Kelly."[32] Both *La La Land* and *The Greatest Showman* feature a mismatch between their story's time period and musical style, the former drawing upon older musical and choreographic styles to tell a contemporary story, and the latter featuring highly contemporary popular-style songs to represent an older time period. The film's songs, by *La La Land*'s lyricists Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, are heavily produced, fully exploiting postprocessing effects in the recording studio, and several of them became successful singles, including "The Greatest Show" and "This Is Me," which became an anthem of empowerment and celebration of difference.[33] Director Michael Gracey got his start shooting commercials and music videos, and in the film's musical numbers, the postmodern music video aesthetic is fully on display, in combination with a cinematographic style that seems like it would be at home in a contemporary action film. A sense of the epic and otherworldly is created by fragmenting the actors' bodies through rapid editing, dizzying arc shots, and experimentation with camera speed and other special effects.

In the number "Rewrite the Stars," for instance, the film's heartfelt love song between an African American acrobat (Zendaya) and the wealthy white socialite Philip Carlyle (Zac Efron), we rarely see the characters in close-up as they are singing; instead, we see a complex acrobatic choreography, as the two characters soar in the air, to the sounds of their autotuned voices and a highly layered conventional pop accompaniment. This stunning visual sequence is cut up by frequent edits and extended arc shots, visually dazzling but emotionally understated because of its focus on the virtuosic camera. At least one stunt double was used for Efron's acrobatics in this scene, which partially explains the need for such frequent editing.[34] Yet, rather than being a tool to display the heightened emotions of the characters, the camerawork draws attention to its own visual spectacle. When we finally do see the couple in close-up together, their faces are in shadow, as the editing style again avoids even a brief earnest declaration of love between the two characters, as would be found in traditional love songs in Golden Age film musicals.

The fragmentation of performers' bodies is apparent even in one of the more modest musical numbers, the duet "The Other Side" with Jackman and Efron. In the song, Barnum tries to convince Carlyle to fund his circus, despite the society man's reservations about how his peers would perceive his involvement in such unrefined entertainment. The two men are alone in a bar, sitting next to each other and drinking, as the bartender pours them drink after drink. The camera begins by following the movement of the liquor bottle, as Barnum grabs it from the bartender, pours them shots, and passes it back to the bartender, who has moved to the other side of the bar. As the song approaches the chorus, the two men spin around in their barstools, and the camera cuts 180 degrees on the downbeat, then spins around as Jackman begins to dance around the bar. His dance, however, is never fully captured in any single camera shot, because the camera cuts to a close-up of his feet as they move, then back to a medium-long shot, then quickly to Efron's reaction shot (Figures 25.2a–d; ▶ Video example 25.2). Both Efron and Jackman are highly trained musical performers, but their voices and lyrics are obscured in the heavily mixed audio track, and their choreography is chopped up by camera movement that seems to intentionally disorient the spectator's sense of space.

In *The Greatest Showman*, which is chock-full of talented singers and dancers, the cinematography and sound editing overshadow the talent of the cast, serving to downplay the emotional impact of their performance by instead highlighting the dazzling capabilities of technology. Though *La La Land*'s visual style may have in part been to compensate for the cast's lack of singing and dancing experience, the effect in *The Greatest Showman* is nearly the same: the visual style of intensified continuity conflicts with the nostalgic impulse in each film's story. *The Greatest Showman*'s story is in many ways about the illusions of entertainment; in a reflexive parallel, the flashy cinematography serves to mask broader anxieties about the illusions inherent in the film musical genre to begin with.

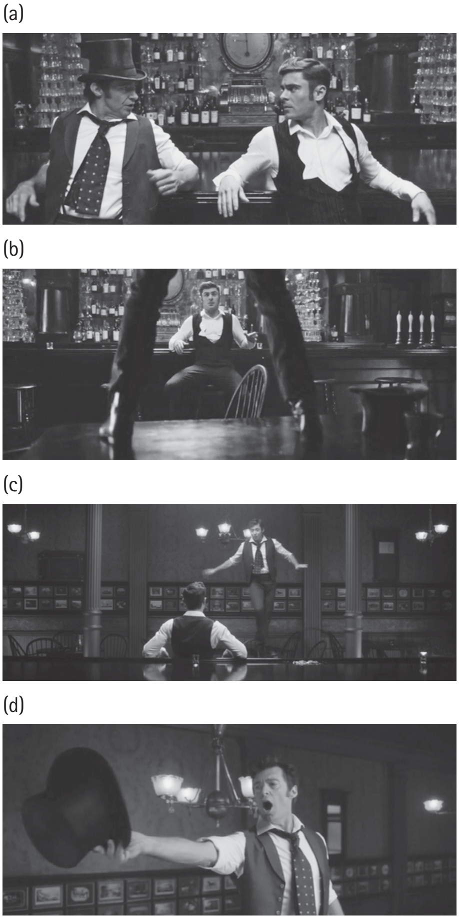

**FIGURE 25.2A–D** “The Other Side,” *The Greatest Showman* (2017).

## TECHNOLOGICAL VIRTUOSITY VS. EARNEST HUMAN PERFORMANCE: ADAPTATIONS, REMAKES, AND CHILDREN’S FILMS

Twenty-first-century film adaptations of stage musicals have represented a wider range of cinematic approaches, but many of the audiovisual features noted above are also present in contemporary adaptations. The very fact of the renewed connection between Broadway and Hollywood makes these films nostalgic endeavors. Because audiences often come to these adaptations with preconceived notions based on the shows’ Broadway productions and soundtrack recordings, but also with expectations that the new versions will exploit the uniquely cinematic possibilities of film, the contemporary film musical adaptations pose somewhat different challenges for filmmakers than do original screenplays. Some films draw explicit connections to their well-known stage counterparts, like *Rent* (2005), which featured many of the original Broadway cast members reprising their roles almost ten years later. Many film adaptations have borrowed heavily from genres that rely on intensified continuity, from the visually epic style of *Into the Woods* (2014), which emulates fantasy adventure films like the *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* sagas, to the references to slasher horror tropes in Tim Burton's adaptation of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007). These films display a more complex form of nostalgia, reminding audiences of both the songs and stories of the original Broadway productions, as well as beloved films in the genres that they reference. Other films have opted to adopt a more realist cinematic style, like *The Last Five Years* (2014), which was very minimalist onstage and was modified in the film version to include additional characters and dialogue to create a more naturalistic cinematic world. Some of the most daring technological experiments in film musical adaptations in the twenty-first century have had mixed critical results. Perhaps the most notable examples are the two musicals directed by Tom Hooper: *Les Misérables* (2012), which was criticized by some for Hooper's unusual choice to record the voices live on set rather than in a studio, and *Cats* (2019), widely panned for the absurdity of the semi-feline CGI rendering of the actors. One thing all of these examples have in common, though, is an attempt to modernize the film musical's audiovisual syntax, with visual techniques like arc shots, whip-pans, and CGI to present their musical numbers. Regardless of the specifics of the style of each film, the virtuosic camera almost always affects the presentation of human virtuosity and singing onscreen.

Another recent trend in the film musical has been the live-action remakes of Disney animated films, which epitomize the tension between nostalgia and technological virtuosity. As remakes and reboots of all kinds have become increasingly popular, a sure-fire way for companies to make a profit in an era of oversaturation of new media content, Disney has turned to adapting their beloved animated musical films for real actors in an attempt to capitalize on the widespread nostalgia for these films. Though they have received critically mixed reviews, remakes such as *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), *Aladdin* (2019), and *The Lion King* (2019) have given audiences familiar sights and songs but in a photorealistic style and, most often, with live actors. These films are steeped in nostalgia, marketed as much toward the adults who grew up with the original films as toward their children, as filmmakers have attempted to emulate the originals, sometimes shot for shot, while updating them to incorporate contemporary cinematic and musical styles. These films, too, often draw attention to themselves as feats of cinematic virtuosity, sometimes to the extent that human performing bodies are entirely absent from the screen. In numbers like "Be Our Guest" from *Beauty and the Beast*, spectacle is created entirely by CGI, creating a virtuosic sequence that relies just as much on animation as the original film did. *The Lion King* took this approach to its logical extreme: although it was often referred to as a live-action remake, only one scene in the entire film was shot without CGI.[35] Director Jon Favreau pointed to the cinematic novelty of such an approach: "The trick here was to make it feel like an entirely new medium. Even though we use animation techniques we wanted it to appear live-action. And that required a lot of technical and technological innovation."[36] As Favreau's statement makes clear, part of the draw of these films is their technological novelty, of bringing to life fantastical events that were previously only possible in an animated world onscreen. But the degree to which onscreen life—human performance—is a part of that fantasy varies widely. Therefore, just like *La La Land* and *The Greatest Showman*, contemporary adaptations and remakes draw viewers' attention away from the singing and dancing of the actors, shying away from their emotional excesses.

Contemporary musical films that do embrace the earnest display of song and dance onscreen are most often films geared primarily for children. Children's film musicals often still unironically highlight the singing and dancing of their characters, perhaps because children are more willing to accept the unnatural context of these performances without finding them contrived or excessively earnest, or perhaps because the virtuosic camera is more associated with genres geared toward adults and is therefore deemed less appropriate or too overstimulating for little kids. Regardless of the reason, children's musicals most often adopt a cinematic style that is more similar to classic Hollywood than other Hollywood musicals of the past two decades.

*High School Musical* (2006) is one such example. The musical television film, which aired on the Disney Channel, kicked off the immensely popular *High School Musical* franchise that features popular stars and is marketed directly to children and "tweens."[37] Set in a modern high school, and focusing on a romance between two high schoolers in different cliques, the film mixes contemporary and classic narrative, visual, and musical styles. Besides the film's modern story, its soundtrack was composed in a contemporary pop music style, distinguished from earlier children's music for its high production value, and became a top-selling album of the year, the song "Breaking Free" becoming a Gold hit single.[38] But the love story also drew on familiar musical theater tropes, and its backstage musical conceit aligned it narratively and stylistically with one of the film musical's main subgenres, what Rick Altman calls the "show musical."[39]

The visual style of the love duet "Breaking Free" contrasts with *The Greatest Showman*'s "Rewrite the Stars." Both songs are sung by a romantic couple; unlike "Rewrite the Stars," the editing style of "Breaking Free" is rendered transparent—made to seem invisible to encourage the audience's narrative absorption—in order to highlight the onscreen chemistry between Gabriella (Vanessa Hudgens) and Troy (Zac Efron) and to draw attention to their singing. Framed as a performance for the high school musical's callbacks, the song uses the show-within-a-show format, allowing for cutting back and forth between the singers and the audience's reaction in the auditorium. The two singers hold microphones and the editing pace is slower, with longer shots that alternate between close-ups of the couple, of each of them individually, and of long shots of the two of them together onstage. An occasional arc shot adds visual variety but ultimately does not draw attention to itself the way the arc shots and traveling shots of *La La Land* and *The Greatest Showman* do. Instead, the focus remains on the couple, their singing, and by extension, their romantic chemistry.

This is also the case in the film's dance numbers. In "Get'cha Head in the Game," Troy sings during basketball practice about how he has become distracted by his interest

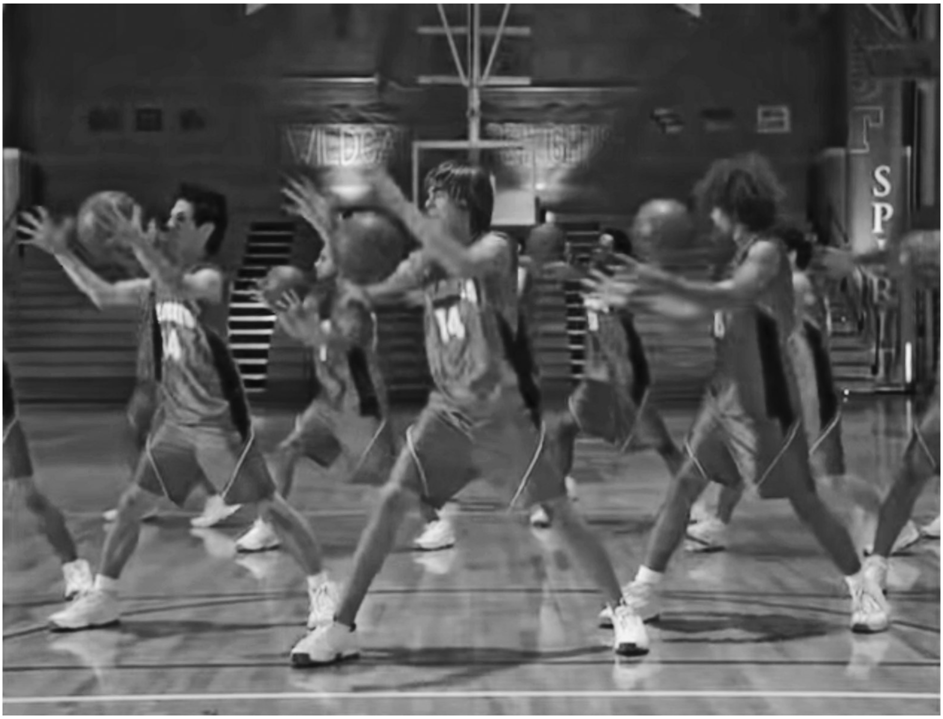

**FIGURE 25.3** "Get'cha Head in the Game," *High School Musical* (2006)

in Gabriella and must renew his focus on his team. At the beginning of the song, the camera does not rest for long on any one actor, but there is an emotional reason for the rapid editing: it creates a sense of the kinetic energy of high school boys practicing basketball. During the second chorus, the team creates a circle, and the camera, in a rapid arc shot, travels over the various players, ultimately landing on a close-up of Efron singing the bridge of the song directly to the camera. Efron's breaking the fourth wall to sing to the camera perhaps brings awareness to the artifice of the scene, but it also is intended to draw the spectator in, as if he is singing directly to them. The choreography that follows is shown with more minimal editing, as all of the dancers bounce a basketball in perfectly synchronized movements (Figure 25.3). Though the cinematography is varied and draws on contemporary editing techniques, the song and the choreography remain the focus. An interesting irony is that Efron's voice was dubbed in this song; but just like countless classic Hollywood musicals of the 1940s and 1950s, the technological trickery is hidden from the spectator, in an attempt to display a unity of voice and body in the onscreen musical performance.

*Mary Poppins Returns* (2018) similarly exploits both old and new cinematic techniques while highlighting human virtuosity. The film has been both praised and criticized for being little more than an update to the original *Mary Poppins* film of 1964, and has been called "nostalgia bait of the highest order."[40] Each song seems to have an exact analogue to the original, such as the number "Trip a Little Light Fantastic," sung and danced by lamplighter Jack (Lin-Manuel Miranda) and a company of lamplighters, which aligns with the original's chimneysweep number "Step in Time," performed by Dick Van Dyke and a chorus of chimneysweeps. Perhaps as a result, director Rob Marshall did not draw extensively on contemporary cinematic editing styles or the use of modern CGI, instead opting to playfully combine hand-drawn animation with live action in the same manner as the original. Critics picked up on this fact: *Vice* reviewer Nicole Clark claimed that the film "triumphs in its understanding of when to employ technology-driven spectacle and when to leverage world class musical theater showmanship" and that the film "faithfully recreat[es] the cinematic techniques of the time."[41] The film's brand of nostalgia is much more explicit than even *La La Land*'s, and although it was intended as much for adults who grew up on the original film as it was for children, it could "get away" with more earnest presentation of song and dance onscreen because it was considered a children's film.

## Conclusion: The Musical's Contemporary Audiovisual Style

The shift in the film musical's audiovisual syntax that I have described has received mixed reactions.[42] Some audiences and critics have found it troubling, expecting that singing and dancing should be the main source of the cinematic spectacle in a film musical. Others have been captivated by the cinematic style of recent Hollywood musicals, finding magic and wonder in the visual effects of CGI and the virtuosic camera. Not all audiences have brought with them preconceived notions of the genre that would lead to the expectation of singing and dancing as the main source of the cinematic spectacle. As audiences have become accustomed to CGI and intensified continuity, through contemporary blockbuster action and fantasy films, their presence in other genres no longer seems unusual or jarring, even in a musical film. Indeed, the emphasis on the virtuosic camera does not necessarily make for worse films: it can move the audience in a different way by leaving them in awe and drawing them into the realm of fantasy. It is unclear whether *La La Land* and *The Greatest Showman* represent the beginning of a trend for new original movie musicals, or merely a blip in the history of the film musical. Nevertheless, many of their features appear to remain alive and well in many film musical adaptations and Disney live-action remakes, both of which seem to have a healthy future ahead of them. Despite mixed critical reactions, box-office success would suggest that sizable audiences still find this contemporary approach to the film musical magical and transcendent.

But the different approach to human and cinematic virtuosity from the genre's Golden Age predecessors is symptomatic of broader cultural and artistic shifts. Whether we consider the contemporary film musical's audiovisual syntax to be a distinct shift away from earlier styles or an updated technological means of serving the same end, it is worth exploring the implications of this focus on technology over human performance.

In his landmark essay "Entertainment and Utopia," Richard Dyer claims that musicals respond to real needs or problems in society and offer onscreen utopian solutions to those problems. So what needs are contemporary filmmakers responding to? What does the film musical in the age of intensified continuity tell us about our particular cultural moment? Boym suggests that nostalgia "inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals."[43] If Busby Berkeley's fragmenting of the female chorus girl in the 1930s was an oblique comment on the dehumanization of the machine age and the Great Depression, then we can certainly find similar resonances in our contemporary moment. In their audiovisual style, contemporary Hollywood musicals reflect current anxieties about the relationship between human expression and technological virtuosity, about the relationship between the draw of the past and the promise of the future. The mixed reception of these films may in part be because of these anxieties. In an era of autotune and CGI, human virtuosity—even basic human expression—is more difficult to pinpoint onscreen and on the soundtrack. How can we, as viewers, trust what we see and hear if we are so highly aware of the manipulation that goes into it? Or perhaps more concerning, what do we make of the fact that audiences are often unaware when sound or image is so frequently manipulated in the first place? The use of CGI to create the illusion of dancers in *La La Land* also points to contemporary anxieties surrounding automation and the politics of labor—of computer graphics taking away potential roles from extras, much in the same way that people have decried how synthesizers and recordings are increasingly replacing live musicians in Broadway pit orchestras.[44]

Nostalgia for the Golden Age of the film musical sits in uneasy tension with this technological ambivalence, providing insight into some of the anxieties of our current cultural moment, our desire to delight in the past while acknowledging its problematic aspects in our contemporary digital age. In revealing a distrust of its own medium, are contemporary film musicals still capable of depicting utopia onscreen the way Golden Age Hollywood musicals did? Is the virtuosic camera in the film musical here to stay? Are *La La Land* and *The Greatest Showman* the way of the future? Or, as filmmakers continue to pay homage to older forms, will they seek to make new technologies more compatible with human virtuosity onscreen? Will there still be a place for more earnest forms of virtuosic musical expression apart from children's films? As cinematic technologies continue to evolve, it will be worthwhile to examine how filmmakers address these issues in the film musical genre in the years to come.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to Elizabeth Craft, Louis Epstein, Kara Gardner, Frank Lehman, and Matt Mugmon for their feedback on various stages of this project. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 2019 American Musicological Society conference in Boston. Manohla Dargis, " 'La La Land' Makes Musicals Matter Again," *New York Times* November 23, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/23/movies/la-la-land-makes-musicals-matter-again.html.

2. On the role of nostalgia in the film musical genre, see Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 332–333.
3. Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 13.
4. Fred Astaire, quoted in John Mueller, *Astaire Dancing: The Musical Films* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 26.
5. Cynthia Brideson and Sara Brideson, *He's Got Rhythm: The Life and Career of Gene Kelly* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 271–272.
6. Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 35–36, 42–44.
7. Scott McMillin suggests that musical numbers take place in a different order of time than "book time," granting them special status in a musical; McMillin, *The Musical as Drama* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 31–53.
8. John Kenneth Muir, *Singing a New Tune: The Rebirth of the Modern Film Musical* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2005), 3.
9. Raymond Knapp, "Getting Real: Stage Musical versus Filmic Realism in Film Adaptations from *Camelot* to *Cabaret*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Musical Theater Screen Adaptation*, ed. Dominic McHugh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 56.
10. Kelly Kessler, *Destabilizing the Hollywood Musical: Music, Masculinity, and Mayhem* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
11. Muir, *Singing a New Tune*, 77.
12. On the resurgence of the film musical, see Muir, *Singing a New Tune*, in George Rodosthenous, ed., *Twenty-First Century Musicals: From Stage to Screen* (New York: Routledge, 2018).
13. The animated films *Moana* (2016) and *Frozen* (2013) also connect to this trend of remakes and nostalgia films, as they are updated takes on previous Disney animated films like *Little Mermaid* and *Snow White*, but animated films are outside of the scope of this chapter.
14. Carol Vernallis, "Accelerated Aesthetics: A New Lexicon of Time, Space, and Rhythm," in Carol Vernallis, Amy Herzog, and John Richardson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 707. See also John Richardson, Claudia Gorbman, and Carol Vernallis, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
15. David Bordwell, "Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film," *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2002): 20.
16. Bordwell, "Intensified Continuity," 20. The 2019 British war epic *1917* is an extreme example, as it was filmed in long takes and elaborately moving shots to appear as if it unfolds in one continuous take.
17. Geoff King, "Spectacle, Narrative, and the Spectacular Hollywood Blockbuster," in Julian Stringer, ed., *Movie Blockbusters* (London: Routledge, 2003), 117.
18. On the music video aesthetic, see Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), and *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Camera* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
19. On the audiovisual style of *Moulin Rouge!*, see Susan Ingram, "It's a Little Bit Funny: *Moulin Rouge*'s Sparkling Postmodern Critique," in Erkki Pekkilä, David Neumeyer, and Richard Littlefield, eds., *Music, Meaning, and Media* (Imatra: International Semiotics Institute, 2006), 66–74; Vernallis, *Unruly Media*, 76–93; Mina Yang, "*Moulin Rouge!* and the Undoing of Opera," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 20 (2008): 269–282; and Robynn Stilwell's

essay in this volume, “Theatricality, Artifice, and Affective Space in the Works of Baz Luhrmann.”

20. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiii.
21. Kara Gardner discusses the dream ballet in her essay in this volume, “Revealing the Subconscious: The Dream Ballet in Movie Musicals.”
22. Carew, “Same Old Song: Nostalgia and Fantasy in *La La Land*,” *Screen Education* 90 (September 2018): 10.
23. See, e.g., Krin Gabbard, “*La La Land* Is a Hit, but Is It Good for Jazz?” *Dædalus* 148, no. 2 (2019): 92–103; Noah Gittell, “The La La Land Backlash: Why Have Critics Turned on the Oscar Favorite?” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/06/la-la-land-criticism-race-gender-jazz-awards; and Ira Madison III, “*La La Land*’s White Jazz Narrative,” *Mtv.com*, December 19, 2016, http://www.mtv.com/news/2965622/la-la-lands-white-jazz-narrative/.
24. A. O. Scott, “Review: Ryan Gosling and Emma Stone Aswirl in Tra La La Land,” *New York Times* December 8, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/08/movies/la-la-land-review-ryan-gosling-emma-stone.html.
25. “How *La La Land* Pulled Off That Stunning Highway Dance Sequence,” *Vanity Fair*, April 25, 2017, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/04/la-la-land-another-day-of-sun-song-video; “ ‘La La Land’ High-Flying Highway Opening Scene: How’d They Do That?” *The Wrap*, December 9, 2016, https://www.thewrap.com/la-la-land-opening-scene-how-they-do-that/.
26. Pamela Robertson, “Feminist Camp in *Gold Diggers of 1933*,” in Steven Cohan, ed., *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), 131.
27. See Richard Barrios, *A Song in the Dark: The Birth of the Musical Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 371–407; Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 202–220; Robertson, “Feminist Camp in *Gold Diggers of 1933*”; Mark Roth, “Some Warners Musicals and the Spirit of the New Deal,” in Rick Altman, ed., *Genre: The Musical—A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1981), 41–56.
28. In musicals, a couple that sings or dances together is seen to be a good romantic match. Conversely, if they do not dance or sing together, they do not seem to naturally belong together. Andrea Most makes this argument about leading couples singing together: if a couple does not sing a duet together, they are seen as fundamentally incompatible; Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 171.
29. Liz Calvario, “ ‘La La Land’ Composer Justin Hurwitz Breaks Down Emma Stone’s Passionate ‘Audition’ Song,” *IndieWire*, December 23, 2016, https://www.indiewire.com/2016/12/la-la-land-composer-justin-hurwitz-breaks-down-emma-stone-audition-song-1201762508/.
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31. Peter Travers, “Review: ‘The Greatest Showman’ Is ‘a Shrill Blast of Nothing,’ ” *Rolling Stone*, December 20, 2017, https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/review-the-greatest-showman-is-a-shrill-blast-of-nothing-202774/.; David Rooney, “ ‘The Greatest Showman’: Film Review,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 20, 2017, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/greatest-showman-film-1067827; Justin Chang,

“Review: ‘The Greatest Showman’ Turns Hugh Jackman’s P. T. Barnum Into a Hero, and Cons the Audience in the Process,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 20, 2017, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-greatest-showman-review-20171220-story.html. For more on *The Greatest Showman* see James Leve’s essay in this volume, “P. T. Barnum Reinvented for the Twenty-First Century.”

32. Brent Lang, “The Music Man: How Hugh Jackman Beat the Odds to Bring *The Greatest Showman* to the Big Screen,” *Variety*, December 5, 2017, 48.
33. *Hollywood Reporter* reviewer David Rooney suggests that the “personality-free songs” seldom “advance the story or deepen our connection to the characters, which means they fail in the most basic job requirement of musical numbers”: Rooney, “ ‘The Greatest Showman.’ ”
34. Sara Piccini, “The Greatest Showmen,” *W&M Alumni Magazine*, January 7, 2020, https://magazine.wm.edu/issue/2020-winter/the-greatest-showmen.php.
35. The only “real” shot in the film is of the African savannah during the opening of “The Circle of Life.” Aja Romano, “Why People Are Calling the new Disney Lion King Remake ‘Live Action,’ ” *Vox*, April 10, 2019, https://www.vox.com/2019/4/10/18209427/the-lion-king-live-action-full-trailer-release; Josh Rottenberg, “ ‘The Lion King’: Is it Animated or Live-Action? It’s Complicated,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 2019, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2019-07-19/the-lion-king-remake-animation-live-action-photo-real.
36. Rottenberg, “ ‘The Lion King.’ ”
37. See Tyler Bickford, “The New ‘Tween’ Music Industry: The Disney Channel, Kidz Bop and an Emerging Childhood Counterpublic,” *Popular Music* 31, no. 3 (2012): 417–436.
38. Bickford, “The New ‘Tween’ Music Industry,” 424.
39. Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 200–271.
40. Nicole Clark, “ ‘Mary Poppins Returns’ Is the Ultimate Nostalgia Film for Burnt-Out Millennials,” *Vice*, December 12, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/ev3knw/mary-poppins-returns-is-the-ultimate-nostalgia-film-for-burnt-out-millennials.
41. Clark, “ ‘Mary Poppins Returns.’ ”
42. See, for instance, “Love ‘La La Land’? Hate It? So Do We,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/15/movies/la-la-land-love-hate.html.
43. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiv.
44. See, for instance, Liam E. Gibbs, “Synthesizers, Virtual Orchestras, and Ableton Live: Digitally Rendered Music on Broadway and Musicians’ Union Resistance,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 13, no. 3 (August, 2019): 273–304.

## CHAPTER 26

# P. T. BARNUM REINVENTED FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

### JAMES LEVE

There are two P. T. Barnums. One is the bigger-than-life nineteenth-century American showman created and propagated by American popular culture. This Barnum—the colorful and shrewd entrepreneur, the embodiment of the American self-made man—has inspired films, stage works, novels, biographies, documentaries, symphonic music, and, more recently, serious scholarship.[1] The films and stage plays about Barnum feature many of the same figures associated with his career: Joice Heth, a former slave who claimed to be 161 years old and a former nursemaid to George Washington; Charles Stratton (General Tom Thumb); the Feegee Mermaid; the internationally renowned soprano Jenny Lind; Jumbo the elephant; and Clyde Bailey. The founding of the Greatest Show on Earth, the circus that resulted from Barnum and Bailey's merger, typically provides the climax for films and plays about Barnum. The other Barnum, the son of a Connecticut merchant who became a successful businessman by accurately sensing and satisfying the public's insatiable appetite for human wonderment, figures large in disability studies. He played a seminal role in engineering the freak show, which exhibited corporeal Otherness for profit. Disability studies scholars argue that the attitudes fomented by Barnum in the nineteenth century led to widespread discrimination of people with disability in the twentieth century.

The 2017 blockbuster movie musical *The Greatest Showman* adopts neither version of Barnum, but it does expose how incompatible they are. The film deviates from the three earlier biopics about Barnum in that it views him through the lens of identity politics in order to appeal to young audiences. All four biopics rely on Barnum's colorful popular culture legacy and care more about providing entertainment than historical accuracy. However, *The Greatest Showman* presents Barnum in an exaggeratedly positive light and gives a grossly distorted account of who he was. It claims to celebrate diversity as represented by Barnum's American Museum, but it expunges from Barnum's biography most of the “freaks” (physically anomalous people) whom Barnum exhibited and minimalizes the few that do appear. The fact remains that in the nineteenth century, absent carnivals and circuses, most people with congenital deformities were unable to earn a living. Having a job gave many freak show and circus performers a sense of dignity, not to mention income. Notably, the majority of people considered “dwarfs” who earned a living in the late nineteenth century did so in the arena of human exhibition. Literature on freak shows recognizes the problematic nature of choice and consent for physically anomalous individuals.[2] The troupe of performers in *The Greatest Showman* includes only a few “freaks” based on actual people but inserts several newly invented characters who feel marginalized—not due to any bodily deviance but for reasons apparently tied to sexuality, race, or class. This chapter argues that in its effort to celebrate diversity as typically represented in popular culture, *The Greatest Showman* reinforces discriminatory practices against people with physical disability.

## The Historical Barnum and Human Curiosities

While alive, Barnum drew sharp criticism from his critics, who considered him a self-aggrandizing purveyor of bad taste. However, from the moment of Barnum’s death, hagiography—largely based on the popularity of the circus bearing his name—took hold and shaped his story. Biographies about Barnum began to appear the year he died and continue to this day.[3] Barnum himself produced several volumes of autobiography (this at a time when such writing was still considered an act of self-aggrandizement).[4] The film and stage works about Barnum are based on a mixture of facts and legend drawn from folkloric, journalistic, novelistic, historical, and biographical sources. Barnum’s reputation as a showman always takes precedent over the fact that he started out a businessman. He certainly saw himself that way. Barnum became a showman because show business was his livelihood. As an American entrepreneur, he shaped his own business practices (including the humbug), wrote his own rules, and made a fortune.

Barnum put pen to paper in part to justify himself and explain his methods—not to satisfy some literary impulse or (despite the title of his first book, *The Life of P. T. Barnum*) to tell the story of his life. *The Life of P. T. Barnum* was read variously as a defense against Barnum’s critics and an entertaining example of the “swindles” to which he was alerting his audience (caveat emptor). Barnum’s decision to write separated him from other businessmen. Writers such as Melville could claim to provide something of value, albeit artistic as opposed to material. In antebellum America, businessmen like Barnum were “purveyors of pleasures,” and they stood apart from farmers and furniture makers. The pejorative attitude toward “purveyors of pleasure” at the time helps to explain why the biopics about Barnum center on his quest for respectability. Karen Renner notes, “Barnum’s autobiography appeared at a time when the nation was poised between two conceptions of self-made manhood, a residual version dating back to the eighteenth century and an emergent ideal that would find its most exemplary models in the so-called captains of industry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.”[5] However, as the king of ballyhoo, Barnum shamelessly exaggerated, tweaked the facts, or otherwise misled the public in order to lure them inside the museum to see the “real” attraction. In effect, Barnum traded in deception as a form of entertainment. *The Life of P. T. Barnum* (1855) puts the buyer on notice, warning him or her to be on the alert for fraudulent claims. Early in the book, Barnum openly admits to committing swindles. In fact, he describes this skill—the art of the humbug—as a positive attribute and claims to provide a valuable service by instructing the public in the concept of caveat emptor. Moreover, if he has humbugged some people with the Feegee Mermaid, he has also brought them the high art of Jenny Lind. Barnum suggests that his acts of charity counterbalance his less respectable actions. Today’s Barnum apologists adopt a similar defense. They too laud the notion, however specious or vague, that Barnum followed his dreams, accepted everyone, and created a family. These two conflicting portraits of Barnum—the human benefactor and the cheap showman—reflect popular culture’s version of Barnum and the scholarly re-examination of him, respectively.

Barnum continues to elicit both adulation and derision, and is amply deserving of both. The same fault line that separates Barnum’s detractors from his champions distinguishes academic scholarship from popular entertainment (and in his own lifetime high art from low art). While popular culture continues to acclaim Barnum, scholars have reassessed the pernicious impact of his flamboyant business practices and his role in shaping negative attitudes toward physically anomalous people. As Benjamin Reiss cautions, “The story of his life that we choose to tell is in part the story that we choose to tell about American culture. . . . We can choose to erase things or dance around touchy subjects and present a kind of feel good story, or we can use it as an opportunity to look at very complex and troubling histories that our culture has been grappling with for centuries.” The most recent biography on Barnum, Robert Wilson’s 2019 *Barnum: An American Life*, takes the middle road, reminding skeptical readers, “We live in an ahistorical age, one that is quick to condemn historical figures using the standards of the present. We too easily dismiss them for their worst qualities even if they are counterbalanced or even heavily outweighed by their best qualities.”[6] More even than Wilson’s apologia, *The Greatest Showman* practically deifies Barnum as one of the great humanitarians of the nineteenth century.

The name Barnum first and foremost conjures the circus. “Barnum’s Animals” still appears on Nabisco’s circus-themed box of cookies. But the circus did not enter Barnum’s biography until rather late in his career. Barnum initially acquired his fame and fortune exhibiting what he called human curiosities, “freaks,” to borrow from the parlance of the nineteenth century. In other words, Barnum’s impact on American culture begins with the exploitation of people marked by exceptional bodies.

As Rachael Adams reminds us, “*freak* is not an inherent quality but an identity realized through gesture, costume, and staging.”[7] Barnum was the master par excellence of the theatrical presentation of corporeal Otherness. Literature on freak shows credits Barnum with perfecting the art of presenting and profiting from physical difference in general and the "monstrous body" in particular. He assembled a troupe of people with physical anomalies, or deformities, and established a unique locus in American show business in which to exhibit them for profit. He began in the early 1840s, with the founding of his legendary American Museum, a large building in lower Manhattan.

Barnum lived during the age of exhibition and practically engineered the transition of the intellectual inquisitiveness of the Enlightenment to American voyeurism as entertainment. For this reason, he figures large in disability studies and in contemporary historical writing on disability. He plays a central role in what Rosemarie Garland Thomson calls "freak discourse": the verbal and visual language by which one engages with "differently formed" bodies in cultural, social, and scientific formal and informal structures.[8] Barnum sensed tremendous economic possibilities in nonconforming bodies. This instinct was perhaps his greatest gift. He also led the way in the "misrepresentation" of the human beings he was exhibiting, employing both the aggrandizing mode and exotic mode. Many call this knack for advertising "showmanship." By exhibiting his human curiosities, Barnum drew attention to corporeal wonders in ways that made them something to be interpreted. This process has been called enfreakment. As Leonard Cassuto describes, "the freak stands as an archetypal 'other,' a disabled figure on theatrical display before an able-bodied audience that uses the display to define its own sense of belonging."[9] The freak label thus began to subsume any and all bodies that were viewed as transgressive as determined by societal norms. In the later part of the century, the "sensationalized discourse" of the freak show was transferred onto the disabled. Modernization, which promoted sameness and standardization, hastened the transition from the fascination with human curiosity to the ableism that discriminates against disability. Medical science and the flood of injured Civil War veterans into American cities in the late nineteenth century precipitated the decline of the freak show and the rise of the social construction of disability and the so-called ugly laws.

Barnum's initial success hinged on his ability to find, hire, and present what he billed as "human curiosities." Small people (labeled "dwarfs" and "midgets" at the time) were among his most popular attractions. Little people in various guises remain popular today in science fiction, utopian and dystopian films, and even television comedy. No little person associated with Barnum, the freak show, or the circus achieved more fame or celebrity than Charles Stratton. In the biopics and books about Barnum, he typically appears with Stratton, whom he reinvented and presented as General Tom Thumb. Stratton ceased growing after five months due to a problem with his pituitary gland. In order to assure doubtful audiences that Tom Thumb was not a child but a little adult, Barnum added years to Stratton's actual age. Barnum recognized cuteness as a cultural construction and a commodity with aesthetic value, and he used Stratton to exploit it. As General Tom Thumb, Stratton exuded cuteness in his physical deportment, vocal production, and disposition. He sang in an "unearthly treble voice." His diminutive size helped solicit adult sympathy toward childhood.[10] Stratton was a performer, dancer, singer, and actor. He specialized in posing as famous historical and fictional figures, including Napoleon. He sang "Yankee Doodle" and other songs, danced, told jokes, and appeared in plays.

In photographs, Stratton strikes a dignified pose. He dressed well, smoked cigars, and enjoyed the life of a celebrity when American was still figuring out what that meant. He sold kisses to women and took "selfies" with them. No daguerreotype fully captures the extent of Stratton's personality, talents, or experience. Barnum toured with Stratton to great success. They were granted audiences with Queen Victoria, King Louis Philippe of France, the Queen of Spain, American presidents, and other famous personalities in America. When Stratton first met the queen of England, she was twenty-four, and he about six. As described by the queen herself, he stood about two feet high and weighed 15 pounds. He wore formal court dress consisting of a red velvet coat, breeches, a powdered wig, a hat, cane, and sword. Feeling a maternal empathy, Victoria expressed concern about his care and feared that he might be mistreated or bullied. At his second audience with the queen, Stratton met the young Prince of Wales and sang "Yankee Doodle." He toured all over the world, owned a yacht, and led a life that belies the traditional image of the freakshow performer as a marginalized and exploited curiosity. Barnum orchestrated the marriage of Tom Thumb and Lavinia Warren, who was nearly the same height as Stratton. Warren left a teaching job to join her husband's act on the stage. As a performing couple, the Strattons achieved extraordinary success.

Stratton rose to prominence at a time when popular culture celebrities were joining the ranks of politicians and war heroes, with whom he eventually intersected.[11] Stratton's physical difference was his livelihood. In other words, it was a virtue, his identity, not something to pity or wish away. Stratton became an international star, appearing in front of more than fifty million people around the world. The historical record shows that he possessed charm, vocal and acting talent, and the gift of gab. He accepted the largess that his small size afforded him. Being a small adult during this period provided considerable cultural capital for Stratton, who was exploited as much as any of Barnum's freak show acts but who also gained more access, wealth, and empowerment than his counterparts. Because Stratton enjoyed more self-agency than the typical sideshow "freak," his status and historical position in the world of freaks is more fluid than was typically the case. Eric Lehman claims, "the label freak disintegrates when it touches Stratton, his popularity and influence as well as his artistry and his actions as a private citizen utterly discombobulate our notions of what a freak was, and what an actor was, if we artificially attempt to separate the two."[12] As Garland Thomson notes, "The physical impairments that render someone 'disabled' are almost never absolute or static."[13] Indeed, the evolution of Stratton from boy to man, from single to married, from dependent to wealthy celebrity underscores the fluidity of his celebrity status. Stratton's smallness was not nearly as "socially disabling," to use Thomson's term, as many other types of physical impairments. Stratton existed in a liminal space "between white and black races, between the adult and the child, the domestic and the foreign, the norm and its manifold exceptions." He made Barnum wealthy, turned him into an internationally famous brand, and twice rescued him from financial ruin. Theirs was a mutually beneficial relationship, and by all accounts their public displays of affection for each other were genuine. It would be an understatement to say that Stratton's importance to Barnum's biography is downplayed in *The Greatest Showman*.

After Stratton, the most important person in Barnum's early career was the world-renowned opera singer Jenny Lind. G. Thomas Couser suggests that both Stratton and Lind brought Barnum into "closer conformity with Victorian propriety." Barnum convinced Lind to sign a contract with him to give a US concert tour. He famously billed her as the "Swedish Nightingale." The popular narrative about Lind painted a picture of piety and hailed her "charitable beneficence" as well as her vocal talent.[14] However, the truth about Lind's voice is not entirely clear. According to reports, her low register was not entirely up to her upper register, and in the high range she sometimes experienced intonation problems. Critics commented on her emphasis of technique over passion. However, Lind's fans dwelled on her sheer vocal talent. They noted her appearance and personality in muted tones and with a deferential nod to her pious reputation. Her voice was "conceptualized as an attribute or manifestation of the self."[15] Barnum admitted that he employed Lind more for the "purity of her morals" than "the clarity of her voice." In fact, he boasted that he hired her without ever having heard her sing and agreed to pay enormous sums for the honor. According to Francis Rogers, "Never in all the history of music has a prima donna been so skillfully and so irresistibly exploited as Barnum exploited Jenny Lind."[16] Today, Lind's reputation as a great diva remains intact. And her own biopic (*A Lady's Morals*, 1930) appeared before any of Barnum's.

Charles Stratton and Jenny Lind are featured in all the films and musicals about Barnum. However, *The Greatest Showman* repositions both of them in Barnum's life, and in ways that belie or at least contradict the film's identity politics.

Barnum presented a wide range of performers at his American Museum, including Eng and Chang (the original "Siamese Twins") and the most popular sideshow attractions of the era: a bearded lady (sometimes Madame Clofullia), a living skeleton (Isaac W. Sprague), a giant (Chang Yu Sing), and several other little people. In several films, a small group of such "human curiosities" accompany Barnum, functioning as shorthand for his museum. Barnum as a character first appeared on film in the 1930 Jenny Lind biopic mentioned above. In one scene, he arrives at the diva's dressing room with several of his performers. Practically the same group reappears in Barnum's first biopic: *The Mighty Barnum*, which credits a few of these performers by name but identifies the others only by their physical anomaly. Bert Wilson (born 1871) played the Tattooed Man here and in other films. Ada Mae Moore was a real snake charmer from the Ringling Brothers Circus. May Boley (1881–1963), an actress best known for her appearance in the 1930 movie *Moby Dick*, played the Bearded Lady. Jolly Ethel played the Fat Woman. (Her only other film credit is as a member of a carnival troupe in *Love in Bloom* [1935], the year of her death.)

## FREAKS VERSUS DIVERSITY POLITICS IN *THE GREATEST SHOWMAN*

Barnum's legacy as a great showman rests on three pillars: Charles Stratton, Jenny Lind, and his circus. In his autobiographies, Barnum himself holds up Tom Thumb, the diva, and the circus as the most important episodes of his career. Barnum's early livelihood as a showman depended on the array of "human curiosities" he hired to appear at the American Museum. This fact provides the point of departure for *The Greatest Showman*. Ironically, however, the film practically erases these historically real people from Barnum's life. These "human curiosities" are diminished in number, and those that are included serve merely as a backdrop to the main plot.

Time and time again, popular culture uses disability to define normality and thereby to make mainstream audiences feel good. Exploitation of this sort is as old as the freak show itself. However, *The Greatest Showman* professes to celebrate diversity, but it substitutes the physical difference historically displayed at Barnum's showplace with identity politics and diversity ideology. This version of diversity conflates difference with diversity. The film gratuitously represents only the most popular attractions of the nineteenth-century freakshow, such as the Bearded Lady, but Charles Stratton and Eng and Chang are the only actual American Museum performers in the film. This small group is augmented by fictional characters whose status as "human curiosities" is vague, stemming, so it seems, from their race, sexuality, class, or hairstyle.[17] They exist in order to provide Barnum with a group of underdogs to champion. Anyone remotely familiar with Barnum's biography will notice the conspicuous absence of Joice Heth, the former slave purchased by Barnum. Heth accounted for Barnum's first major success as a showman; but rather than attempting to reconcile the film's positive image of Barnum with his troubling handling of Heth, the filmmakers simply erased her from his story. The film's human curiosities lack backstories, and most of them have a single exchange with Barnum when he first hires them. Thereafter, they are never heard from again as individuals, with the exception of Leta. Instead of actual extraordinary bodies, the film features Annie Wheeler, a fictional trapeze artist who has no apparent abnormal physical marker. She is played by Zendaya, a beautiful, biracial, physically fit, and multitalented young artist. By minimizing the physical anomalies of the "freaks," the film treats them not as uniquely formed individuals but rather as a single entity, an abstraction of difference. In effect, the film displays (and homogenizes) physical difference in order to address contemporary and politicized marginalized identity. The film ostensibly touts inclusivity (i.e., diversity) but ends up rendering disability (or physical anomaly) indistinct from, or even secondary to gender, race, and class, the triad of identity politics. The film relegates all marginalized identities to the category of "freak," which in turn robs the term of its historical significance as a reference to the physically differently formed.

Ironically, Barnum's American Museum may be the least ideal milieu in which to focus on diversity, given that Barnum helped to engineer the process of enfreakment, which turns people with physical deformities into freaks and thereby marginalizes them. Freak show proprietors trafficked in human strangeness, which was defined as abnormal, abhorrent, monstrous bodies. The filmmakers chose the freak show (i.e., American Museum) as an analog for the strangeness that some marginalized identities feel today. The "human oddities," to invoke the term adopted in interviews by the film's cast, represent the political interests of the film's young target audience. However, today's body piercer, tongue splitter, and full-bodied tattooed person are perhaps behaviorally (and sometimes even intentionally) strange in their relationship to mainstream society, but they have self-selected. Corporeal alterity, however, is defined by "the oppressive and exclusionary operations of the normal."[18] It is a process of marginalization. By today's standards, the fully tattooed person in the film does not appear to be an anomaly at all. And the fat man clearly fits into the continuum between thin and obese that exists today. By casting the net as wide as possible, the film crowds out the people in Barnum's world who actually were discriminated against because of physical deformities or congenital abnormalities. The film retains a few historically authentic "freaks" from Barnum's American Museum in order to lend the film a sense of authenticity but ejects most of them from the circus tent. Most of the others are designed to appeal to the film's primary demographic. To equate Zendaya with corporeal Otherness seems facetious. Her pink hair is a fashion statement. She must claim strangeness (and a vague marginality) in order to qualify as a member of Barnum's entourage. On the other hand, the film needs her for purely commercial reasons. These people resemble (and thereby represent) a nebulous group of young people who desire a place, a sense of community, and a voice. They yearn for acceptance, and the film turns Barnum into a hero who gives it to them.

The film appeals to audiences by heralding diversity as a goal of identity politics. However, this emphasis on diversity poses a vexing problem for the film. Diversity ideology encompasses unique identities and simultaneously argues that no one identity is superior to any other. Historically, though, disability has usually been eliminated from or placed last on the list of identities included "under the diversity banner."[19] Forced sterilization and eugenics actively sought to eliminate the abnormal. The civil rights movement challenged such efforts, but it initially failed to recognize people with disabilities as a category in need of protection. In the postwar years, LGBT+ people lagged behind those identities defined by geopolitical realities, ethnicity, race, and class. As already noted, disability complicates the ideological conviction that no identity is superior to another. Disability is not a life choice. It is "an act of fate and evidence of powerlessness." It is an abject identity.

*The Greatest Showman* qualifies more as a fantasy than a biopic. Hugh Jackman's Barnum makes no distinction between the freak show performers based on real people and people who merely feel that they do not fit in (including "synthetic freaks," people who elect to pierce their eyelids or nipples). Both groups become part of the imaginary universe of acceptance created by Barnum. Thus, the film conflates strange (in the sense of not belonging) with freak. People who merely identify as "strange" but have no stigmatizing physical feature must claim this space, once occupied by dwarfs, conjoined twins, and so on, in order to benefit from Barnum's munificence. Figuratively speaking, though, when they move into the tent, they displace the "authentic freaks" that Barnum employed.[20] The film's constituent audience desires what the film claims the freaks had–a home, a family, and a sense of belonging. But historically, Barnum only exhibited physical difference. He was not in the business of catering to the dispossessed and disenfranchised. Race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender only played a secondary role at Barnum's American Museum, and only as an aspect of the unusual attractions. Ethnicity, for instance, might have played a role in the advertising that Barnum developed to hype his attractions, such as the "Missing Link." It was part of the "freak show spiel" that Barnum himself helped to invent. *The Greatest Showman* essentially presents the opposite, thereby squeezing out the historically real victims in order to make an uplifting film about identity. Barnum himself is on exhibit here. And he is the personification of identity politics and a voice of Millennials and Gen Zers.

The narrative surrounding *The Greatest Showman* at the time of its premiere lauded the film's focus on diversity, inclusion, and the theme of being true to oneself; and the marketing campaign left no doubt as to the film's intended demographic. In one trailer for the film, Barnum exclaims, "Every one of us is special, and nobody is like anyone else" as the music to "This Is Me" plays in the background. The trailer ends with the slogan: "No one ever made a difference by being like everyone else." Equating Barnum's original sideshow performers as "very special" people has a precedent in Frederick Drimmer's book on "human oddities."[21]

> [T]hey weren't . . . strange. They are very special. They carry a special burden—and they carry it with dignity and courage. That is why, in this book, you'll rarely find them called freaks. . . . I call them "Very Special People." And that, as you will soon see, is what they are.

Along with this narrative, Michael Gracey, the director of the film, aims to show that "Barnum created a family through a group of people who was going to be there for each other and who were going to love each other." No previous film or book had pushed this narrative of Barnum as the compassionate patriarch. The film practically imagines that Barnum envisioned a utopian community of people who yearn for acceptance. The producer of the film likewise makes the baseless claim, "What P. T. Barnum did better than anyone in the world was be inclusive and celebrate peoples' differences and different people and bring them together as a family." To interpret Barnum's exploitation of physical difference as a humanitarian act is to ignore his seminal role in the history of disability and enfreakment in America. As though rehearsed and following the example of Jackman and Gracey, the cast and crew speak with one voice about the film's uplifting message. They hail the uplifting theme and described it with misty-eyed optimism and words such as "dreams," stars," "vision," and "family." The actors claim Barnum for themselves: "He's our P. T. Barnum," "our" apparently representing people of their generation and political persuasion.[22]

Even the film's songwriters, Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, propagated the false notion that Barnum was ahead of his time. Pasek exclaims, "He wasn't bound by the world in which he lived; he wanted to create one." Paul asserted that the contemporary pop score was intended to capture a man ahead of his time. This argument ignores the fact that contemporary pop and rock have been the lingua franca of musical theater for over two decades and has been used in musicals set in various historical periods.

Hugh Jackman provided the friendly and appealing face of Barnum that the cast and creative staff needed in order to advance the film's message: not the man Barnum was but the one they wish Barnum had been. Jackman's Barnum is arguably the most affable and handsome Barnum ever put on stage or screen. As part of the Hollywood establishment, Jackman also benefited from playing a protagonist who represents today's socially conscious youth by celebrating themes of inclusion and of following one's dream.

*The Greatest Showman* employs the Hollywood trope of the "white savior" (a protagonist in a position of privilege) who champions the underdog (some marginalized character or group of characters). Protagonists of this kind are typically the point-of-view character and the primary benefactor of their actions. The film's treatment of the "human oddities" employed at the American Museum reflects a long-standing treatment of characters with abnormal bodies on screen. They make Barnum look good by providing an opportunity for him to champion a disenfranchised group.

This version of Barnum is a sensitive man for the twenty-first century, a family man, a man who is not afraid to cry. The central plot is a variation of the love story involving a man who loses his way at the expense of his wife and children, only to rediscover the correct path. The action hinges on Barnum's desire for respectability: first, in the form of acceptance by his brutally arrogant father-in-law and, second, by the stuffy cultural critic James Gordon Bennett (i.e., the arbiter of good taste) and the class of people he represents. Barnum's quest for acceptance reaches back to his childhood, when he begins courting Charity. Her father violently rejects Barnum, and they subsequently elope. Barnum's efforts to succeed in business stem from his determination to gain a sense of worth and dignity. However, the film suggests, falsely, that Barnum's efforts to exhibit human oddities were motivated by a moral imperative, when, in fact, Barnum merely found business opportunities in a social climate that already existed.

Jackman's Barnum is also a dedicated family man. Caroline, Barnum's elder daughter, aspires to be a ballerina. In other words, she wants to partake of the high art world, for that is what respected upper-class white girls are expected to do. Invented for the film, this fictional plot detail mirrors and thus draws attention to the social slight that Barnum himself experiences. Caroline is subjected to teasing by some of the snobby girls in her class. "New York society will never accept us," Charity exclaims to her husband. His disdainful attitude toward the upper class, therefore, is associated with his role as a good father.

The movie juxtaposes two versions of Barnum. One is the *paterfamilias* of both his immediate family and the "human curiosities" he has hired to appear at the American Museum. The other Barnum is an outsider in his own world of heteronormative mainstream society. As presented in the film, Barnum rejects both the pedestrian upper-class snobs who reject him and the boorish working-class bigots who attack the "freaks" he employs at the American Museum, even as he continues to enjoy a certain position of privilege as a white, handsome, and, above all, able-bodied man. Perhaps the film's most crushing irony is that the very people whom Barnum exploits bestow upon him a beneficent quality by interpreting his actions as an act of charity and goodwill, this at a time when the victimization of freak show performers (the "passive victim" versus the willing participant) has come under greater scrutiny.[23] The film's revisionist history in effect exonerates the historical Barnum. Such leniency would never be tolerated in cases of racism or sexism, which reveals the lingering tendency to treat disability differently from other marginalized or stigmatized identities.

The screenwriters invented a major fictional character, Phillip Carlyle, playwright and scion of an aristocratic family. Played by Zac Efron, Carlyle provides a second handsome romantic figure who boosts the film's emphasis on tearing down class and racial barriers—not to mention a romantic interest for Anna (Zendaya). Barnum seeks him out in order to bring a touch of class to his operation (which the "freaks" cannot provide). Barnum urges Carlyle to teach him "how to appeal to the highbrows." Zendaya and Efron are objects of the camera's, and thus the audience's, gaze, and their relationship receives considerable screen time. Their duet, "Rewrite the Stars," which they perform while executing breathtaking and intricately filmed aerial acrobatics, marks them as exceptional. Michael Ordoña described Efron and Zendaya as "insanely beautiful young people," hardly the type of description that would appeal to the countless people who might relate to the film's physically different cast members.[24]

## BARNUM IN POPULAR CULTURE

After Barnum's death, America celebrated him as a nineteenth-century cultural hero. The continued fascination with Barnum today is understandable, as he was one of the most colorful figures in early American history. His life and career intersected with virtually every major issue in America's first full century as a nation, including the Civil War, abolitionism, temperance, and suffrage. As a subject, P. T. Barnum satisfies three basic building blocks of the Hollywood backstage biopic: romance, celebration of genius, and entertainment.

The name "Barnum" evoked good feelings and fond memoires for average Americans. The popularity of the circus insured his legacy throughout the twentieth century. Films and stage works about Barnum divide their attention between Barnum's early success with the American Museum and later involvement with the circus. The earliest dramatization of Barnum's life is the 1918 Broadway play *Mister Barnum*. The text for this play is lost, but reviews give the impression that it was a lively entertainment featuring some performers who knew Barnum personally. The plot involved a former associate of Barnum's who tries to swindle him out of his circus, and it featured Tom Thumb and his wife Lavinia, and the Bearded Lady.[25] The play, co-written by Thomas Alfred Wise and Harrison Garfield Rhodes, was intended as a star vehicle for Wise.[26]

The character of Barnum first appeared on the silver screen in the 1930 Jenny Lind biopic, *A Lady's Morals*. Wallace Beery played Barnum, portraying him as a dimwitted fool. Barnum's sole appearance in the film includes a large entourage of his freak show performers. They arrive at Lind's dressing room door as she prepares for her American concert debut. He introduces his "boys and girls" (including a bearded woman, contortionist, giant, and conjoined twins) and exits.

Studio heads must have liked Barnum, for the actor played the same role four years later in the first Barnum biopic, *The Mighty Barnum*. Here, too, Beery plays Barnum as a buffoon, and with far less sex appeal than any of the subsequent depictions of Barnum on stage or screen.[27] Beery's Barnum is an underdog who ultimately triumphs over adversity. Multiple events are spun entirely out of whole cloth. For instance, the Bearded Lady, played by May Boley, sexually assaults Barnum. Film critic Andre Sennwald wrote that Barnum is "pilloried as shamelessly as any of his freaks. A vague and foolish provincial, he emerges on the screen as a more thorough sucker than the public which made him great."

The next two Barnum biopics are made-for-television movies. The first (1986) stars Burt Lancaster and chronicles Barnum's career in a stodgy episodic manner, which gives the film the feeling of a docudrama. Breaking the fourth wall, Lancaster's Barnum addresses the audience directly and narrates the story of his life in a series of flashbacks. Without any irony, he recalls his various humbugs, Lancaster comes off as a somewhat charmless businessman looking back on his career. He lacks the bluster of Wallace Beery, the charm of Beau Bridges (who plays Barnum in the next biopic), the energy of Jim Dale (who starred in the 1980 Broadway musical *Barnum*), and the sex appeal of Hugh Jackman.

The next movie (1999) features Beau Bridges, who exudes a cheerier disposition than either Beery or Lancaster.[28] This movie provides a relatively accurate and straightforward historical biography of Barnum. It even includes Barnum's second marriage. Bridges's Barnum wants to be liked but not walked over. He is shrewd and aggressive but not without charm. He puts his business dealings ahead of his family. Although this movie hews more closely to the biographical facts, Bridges's Barnum rarely interacts or engages with the American Museum performers, Stratton being the main exception. In her review of the movie, Laura Fries writes, "the film manages to avoid the exploration of any possible exploitation by Barnum of his many human 'exhibits.' "[29]

None of these movies or plays emphasizes Barnum's fame as a circus proprietor to the same extent as the 1980 Broadway musical *Barnum*.[30] This musical includes Stratton and Joice Heth, but it de-emphasizes the freakshow milieu. Instead, it uses the circus as a conceptual framework. The musical unfolds as a series of circus acts (vignettes) that dramatize Barnum's career and builds to the founding of the Greatest Show on Earth (the behemoth emerging from the merger of Barnum's and Bailey's respective circuses). So even Heth's and Stratton's scenes function as segments of a circus. In 1980, commercial musicals still relied on the marriage trope. As in the Barnum biopics, Jenny Lind is the object of Barnum's roving eye, but the stakes never rise very high. Lind sings a waltz ("Love Knows No Rules"), which features a seductive chromatic descent on "Sweeping the stage, / Mad or sublime." Lind sings the song first in Swedish—further emphasizing her European heritage—and then in English.

*Barnum* was the most family-oriented musical to open after *Annie*, which had opened a few years earlier. That Phineas and Charity's marriage survives and thrives ensured theatergoers that *Barnum* was a family musical. Charity's resolute nature serves as a counterforce to Barnum's peripatetic professional life. Acting as his moral compass, she keeps him on the straight and narrow. Jim Dale originated the role of Barnum on Broadway, and Michael Crawford starred in the role in the first English production, but, judging from the New York reviews, the director, Joe Layton, was the musical's true star. The theory of less-is-more is at play here, and Layton and company worked miracles to create the illusion of a grand circus atmosphere, and a cast of few moved, danced, sang, and came off like a cast of thousands. The musical reinforced the hagiographic narrative about Barnum and steered clear of the serious questions hanging over him today. The critics upheld Barnum's reputation as, to quote Douglas Watt, a "flamboyant 19th-century American impresario and master of flimflam."[31] Only the *Soho Weekly News*'s Tish Dace drew attention to the show's avoidance of the ethical dimension of Barnum's career.[32]

We have already observed that Stratton and Lind represented, respectively, low and high culture during the nineteenth century as well as the stigmatized and normal body. They both enjoyed the public gaze of early celebrity culture. Indeed, as performers, they achieved international fame at a propitious moment in the history of popular entertainment. *The Greatest Showman* marks a major departure from the way that Lind and Stratton appeared in earlier biopics. Notably, the film emphasizes and sexualizes Lind while demoting Stratton. The earlier films all feature a little person in the role of Stratton and include a greater number of events in the public record of his life, in particular Stratton's first and sometimes second audience with Queen Victoria. Barnum made the most of his and Stratton's early professional relationship.

The 1934 *The Mighty Barnum* features George Brasno as Tom Thumb. Brasno has lots to do in this film, although much of it is not based on historical fact. The film included Brasno's sister, Olive (with whom he had appeared as a brother and sister vaudeville act), who played Stratton's wife, Lavinia.[33] For some reason, Brasno's Stratton hails from Cincinnati and is thirty when he first introduces himself to Barnum. Like the real Stratton, Brasno was a singer and working actor, but the film does not take advantage of his talent. Brasno plays Stratton as an independent, self-sufficient, and insouciant performer. He is a minor hero, in one scene arriving like a knight in shining armor to save Barnum's flagging business. This scene reflects the fact that Stratton enjoyed considerable agency. Stratton arrives on the scene and cheers up Barnum, invites him home for dinner, a pretext for several other "freaks" to rally around their old boss. Earlier in the film, when Tom mentions Jenny Lind and the freaks in the same breath, Barnum admonishes them for equating themselves with her—foreshadowing Jackman's Barnum's rejection of the freaks in *The Greatest Showman*. When Barnum enters the dining room, he is met by the fat lady, the giant, two unidentified men, and Madame Zorro (repentant for having sexually assaulted Barnum earlier). They offer to work for Barnum for free until business picks up. Barnum exclaims, "General, you're the littlest man in the world, [but] you're a bigger man than I could ever be." The film only alludes to Stratton's famous audience with Queen Victoria in what resembles a newsreel. A short montage telescopes Barnum's European tour and showcases the snake charmer, the tallest man (giant), African tribespeople, the fat lady, a man who lies on nails, a fire eater (seemingly from India), a mermaid, and Tom and Lavinia, whom Barnum holds in his arms. Similarly, the Jenny Lind episode is treated with little regard for historical accuracy. She performs "Casta diva." Barnum falls under her spell, but this segment of the plot never develops into anything except a comic interlude. A greater threat to Barnum's wife, Nancy (named after Barnum's actual second wife) is Lily Zorro, the Bearded Lady who is infatuated with Barnum (and pursues him aggressively). The performers at Barnum's museum were played by real circus and sideshow performers, which was also the case in Tod Browning's 1934 film *Freaks*.

Charles Stratton makes several appearances in the two later television biopics, both of which emphasize Stratton's importance to Barnum's career and the exploitation of him as a human novelty. The Lancaster movie incorporates a greater span of Stratton's life. Sandor Raski (born 1945) played the young Tom, and the actress Patty Malone (born 1936) the older Tom. When Barnum inquires whether he can sing and dance, Stratton demonstrates these skills with "Yankee Doodle." He sings with the vocal control of an untrained boy singer. Moreover, this film includes a scene in which Tom performs. Throughout this and subsequent scenes, Barnum treats Stratton paternally and teaches him the skills he needs, including how to portray Napoleon. This is the first of three movies to include Stratton's encounter with Queen Victoria. As Barnum and Tom approach the queen, a very young Prince of Wales, sporting a kilt, spots them and exclaims, "There he is!" Tom speaks out of turn and addresses the queen directly, a faux pas intended to depict American insolence (and by extension Barnum's own insouciance) as a virtue. Stratton's lack of obsequiousness ultimately wins over the queen, who finds him adorable. Here as in some of the other films, this scene follows very closely the famous encounters as reported in Frederick Drimmer's *Very Special People*.[34] As an actor, Raski is known for little else. Malone had appeared with a carnival and the Ringling Brothers Circus. She attended college and held several jobs. Her film and television credits include *The Brady Bunch Variety Hour*.

Josh Ryan Evans (1982–2002) played Tom Thumb in the biopic starring Jeff Bridges. This version emphasized the young Tom's "cuteness" even more than the previous version, reflecting the tendency of popular culture to exploit little people in fictional fantasy (giving them elfin and fairy tale qualities). Barnum travels by carriage to Stratton's house. A nine-year-old Stratton descends the stairs while clinging to his mother. Barnum and Charles converse briefly. Stratton has a slight speech impediment and a childish giggle. Stratton's quick rise to stardom is telescoped in a few scenes, during which he dances, salutes, marches, puns, and sings. Evans aggressively sought out acting opportunities and was quite active at the time of his tragic death at the age of twenty due to a medical procedure related to congenital heart failure.

Sam Humphrey (born 1994) played Tom Thumb in *The Greatest Showman*. Born in New Zealand and living primarily in Australia, he is the only non-American actor to play Tom. Humphrey's stunted growth was caused by acrocephalosyndactyly. He began acting only shortly before getting cast as Tom Thumb. The film literally and figuratively minimizes Stratton in Barnum's biography. Humphrey's Stratton speaks in a deep (i.e., mature) voice and, like Brasno, appears as an adult. He is less sanguine about life and, like Leta, carries a chip on his shoulder. As demeaning as these details might be, the most shocking disregard for the real Stratton involves his audience with Queen Victoria. The filmmakers relegate Stratton to a mere pawn in this famous episode. When the invitation from the queen arrives, Stratton threatens not to appear unless his friends are also included. This deviation from the well-documented encounter epitomizes the film's tendency to place disability behind other marginalized identities. On the surface, Stratton's insistence appears altruistic and imparts of sense of solidarity, but it further diminishes the importance of the film's only real-life character with a physical anomaly and who led a truly remarkable life. During the second half of the nineteenth century, being a little person gave some adults considerable cultural capital, and Stratton, who was exploited as much as any of Barnum's freak show attractions, gained more access, wealth, and empowerment than most of his counterparts then or now. It is therefore notable that the filmmakers reduced Stratton's historical importance.

To add insult to injury, Humphrey, who is taller than the real Stratton was, was forced to walk on his knees because the filmmakers wanted to emphasize the height difference between Stratton and Barnum. They employed CGI to make the effect look real. (The film apparently used technology to make Humphrey's voice sound like a mature man's voice.) Moreover, Humphrey spent hours rehearsing the dances, but the director deleted him from those moments in the film because he was always on his knees.[35] Humphrey felt bitter about the cuts, given that he had learned all the choreography. Appearing in *The Greatest Showman* seems to have done little to elevate his career, which has not gone as he expected. Humphrey has attempted to commit suicide several times.[36]

Only the Broadway musical *Barnum* featured an actor of normal height as Tom, which, as we will see, was the basis for the gimmick of the song that Stratton sings. As already described, the musical tells the story of Barnum's life chronologically through a series of self-contained vignettes. Tom Thumb appears only once and performs "Bigger Isn't Better" as though the song were part of his act. The scene mashes together two major episodes of Barnum's career that actually occurred decades apart, his discovery of Tom Thumb and the importation of Jumbo the elephant from England. Tom's song is preceded by a brief exchange between Barnum and Stratton's parents. Stratton's mother insists that "Any boy only 25 inches tall from head to tall is a freak of nature" and therefore worth more than Barnum was offering. Using reverse logic, Barnum claims, "Joice Heth is 160 years old. Madame Josepha has a 10″ beard and stands 8½ feet tall. That doesn't make them freaks of nature, Mrs. Stratton. It makes them special."

Cy Coleman, the composer of *Barnum*, introduces Tom's song with a variation of "Yankee Doodle." The refrain, though, recalls Tin Pan Alley novelty songs. Although a diegetic song, "Bigger Isn't Better" functions as a clever self-reflexive commentary on his size. In lieu of casting a little person to play Stratton, Layton and the designer, David Mitchell, created a visual illusion to make the normal-size actor playing Tom appear little. This theatrical trompe-l'oeil was one of several gimmicks that gave *Barnum* its charm. However, the trick deflects attention away from the song's inherent ableist attitude. "Bigger Isn't Better" reduces Stratton's identity to a single physical feature—which is emphasized by the somewhat defensive title line as well as the juxtaposition of Tom and Jumbo the elephant. Moreover, Tom Thumb exuded cuteness ("a perfect man in miniature"[37]), which was in line with the aggrandized mode that Barnum exploited and others borrowed for the exhibition of little people. All too often, the physically disabled person is seen only through the lens of his or her physical difference. This process reduces the "complex person to a single attribute."[38] For young and old audiences who perhaps never heard of Tom Thumb, the number provides some biographic information. However, the music and lyrics provide no opportunity for the actor to reveal any true emotions or interiority. Stratton's fame was based on his talents as a performer. "Bigger Isn't Better" reduces these talents to a novelty act.

Throughout the twentieth century, Barnum was presented as a rugged individualist, a self-assured showman, and a Romantic-era "processor of genius." He is among the "heroic figures of protean, even supernatural energies, whose supreme accomplishments were to be *inventions* rather than imitations," to quote John Tibbetts.[39] Hugh Jackman and Michael Gracey had no interest in making a traditional Barnum biopic. Nor did they care to correct historical inaccuracies about Barnum. After all, a biopic is one of the lowest forms of history. Moreover, the film's target audience was not looking for a history lesson. Jackman and Gracey felt that Barnum provided a good basis for an appealing movie with a positive message for young people. The three earlier biopics present Barnum's life and career in a series of episodes and avoid passing harsh judgment on aspects of his life that would offend modern sensibilities. They celebrate Barnum as a cultural hero and do not try to reassess his legacy. *The Greatest Showman* too avoids unflattering facts but, unlike the earlier biopics, also recasts Barnum as a champion of the disenfranchised. The reinvented plot acknowledges the struggle of many marginalized young people today. Jackman's Barnum is the most humane version of the showman, but he is also the least Barnumesque. He ends up exploiting the marginalized status of people with corporeal difference (yesterday's freaks and today's disabled) to achieve a greater sense of his own self-worth. The large fan base for the film attests to the extent that young people struggling to claim their own sense of identity must confront racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and ableism.

The intersection of Barnum's reputation as a showman and vocation as a businessman has always marked a seminal moment in the history of popular culture in America. As already suggested, Barnum reified physical deviance in American popular entertainment. *The Greatest Showman* uses this historical point to justify turning the circus (a representation of popular entertainment) into a site to celebrate American diversity and thereby to take a political stance toward the various cultural identities associated with diversity. The film suggests that Barnum intentionally provided a utopian community of people who yearn for acceptance. In effect, it maps a moral intentionality or imperative onto what Barnum probably considered a vibrant business operation.

For the first half of the movie, Jackman's Barnum is unimpeachable. He works diligently to establish his business and achieve his "dream." He is inventive, quick-witted, resourceful, and, most of all, a good family man. His paternal love and ultimate commitment to his marriage provide the basis for calling the movie a family musical.

Because Jenny Lind and Charles Stratton (aka General Tom Thumb) were the two most important figures in Barnum's career, they figure large in every play and film about the showman. However, *The Greatest Showman* marks a departure from the earlier films and stage works with regard to Barnum's relationship to the diva and famous little person. The film weaves Lind into the main fabric of the plot and thereby elevates the singer's importance in Barnum's personal life. On the other hand, the film practically erases Stratton from Barnum's career, reducing his role to a short scene with Barnum and a single solo line in "This Is Me." Stratton merely serves the function of representing all of the physical curiosities at the American Museum. His remarkable life and importance in the history of corporeal Otherness apparently did not serve the political agenda of the film. On the other hand, Lind serves to humanize Barnum as well as provide steamier romantic encounters with him than Charity (as portrayed by Michelle Williams) can. In the film, Barnum falls in love with Lind. His dalliance with her threatens his image as a good husband and father.[40]

*The Greatest Showman* is not the first film to invent a romantic relationship between Lind and Barnum, but it takes it to a new level. In this respect, it should be noted that commentators then and now have emphasized Lind's plainness. Rogers notes, "Nor was there anything spectacular about Jenny Lind's character and behavior. She was absolutely unpretentious in bearing, a sternly devout Protestant. . . . [T]here is no evidence of humor or unusual social gifts in her intercourse with the outside world. Altogether, a woman, except for her musical qualities, designed by nature for a housewife rather than for a prima donna."[41] She does not evoke the glamour of nineteenth-century celebrities such as Liszt or even Clara Schumann; and she shares none of Charles Stratton's joviality, humor, or lifestyle.

Lind plays a pivotal role in the film in two ways: (1) she creates a love triangle that threatens the film's portrayal of Barnum as a family man and keeps the romantic tension of the story alive; and (2) she is the epitome of beauty and able-bodiedness. As portrayed by Rebecca Ferguson, Lind represents the white, upper-class European as the ideal. Ferguson's complexion is milky-white, accentuated by her diamond-studded white gown, ruby red lips, blue eyes, and flaming red hair.[42] The film maps ethnicity and race onto the other freaks, which further distinguishes them from Lind. The Lind episode provides the impetus for Barnum's betrayal of the very same people who provide his livelihood. When, after witnessing Lind's concert, they try to crash the post-concert reception, Barnum abruptly shuns them. His uncharacteristic rebuke stems more from their low social status than from their physical anomalies. Barnum's poor treatment of his employees gives rise to the film's thematic anthem. Lead by Leta, they gather outside the concert hall and march by the protesters to the American Museum while singing "This Is Me," which turns into a synchronized dance for the spectators that have somehow gathered there.

With only one exception, the earlier Barnum biopics include at least one concert scene in which Lind sings an aria or two. By contrast, Stratton's talents are either ignored or only very briefly displayed. *The Greatest Showman* asks its audience to split their sympathies between Lind and the human curiosities at Barnum's museum, but the former overshadows the latter. The concert scene mentioned above features Lind singing the famous aria "Casta diva" from *Norma*, which the real Lind regularly performed. However, unlike the earlier biopics, *The Greatest Showman* is an original musical, which meant that Pasek and Paul felt obligated to write a new song for Lind (as did Cy Coleman for the musical *Barnum*). The songwriters came up with a pop-opera ballad, "Never Enough," rather than an authentic operatic aria, thereby turning Lind into a pop-rock diva. Although belted, the song's long and rangey lyrical lines are intended to represent or invoke the grand sweep and difficulty of operatic music.

Lind may have represented Barnum's only professional encounter with a first-class cultivated talent. When Hugh Jackman's Barnum listens to Lind for the first time, he weeps real tears (Jackman's Barnum is not afraid to show his emotions) and, subsequently, falls in love with her. Her performance stands apart from anything else Barnum has presented and certainly affected audiences differently. Moreover, Rebecca Ferguson's Lind falls in love with Barnum, but she avoids appearing like a homewrecker. She is both a femme fatale and tragic or scorned heroine in the mode of Maria Callas, both images far removed from the real Jenny Lind. Finally, Barnum's lowbrow (i.e., freak) performers themselves adulate the star. Leta, the Bearded Lady, who is identified as a singer, is in awe of Lind's singing.[43]

Played by Keala Settle, Leta serves two major roles in the film: (1) she is the spokesperson for the troupe of performers working for Barnum—and by extension for the disenfranchised in general; (2) a knock-out belter, she is vocally and physically identified with low art and therefore provides a strong contrast to Lind. Settle leads the ensemble in the film's biggest hit, "This Is Me." She turned in a dynamic performance, but the elevation of Leta is not dramatically justified. Like the other "freaks," she has a chip on her shoulder and just wants to be loved. On the other hand, young movie audiences related to Settle because of her vocal performance but also because of what she represented. Leta's admiration of Lind after she performs "Never Enough" invites the film's youthful audience—most of which, one can assume, have never attended an opera—also to embrace her. We therefore acknowledge that Lind's exceptionalism counts more than the physical anomalies of Barnum's other performers. In the nineteenth century, Lind's vocal gifts elevated her, bringing her closer to God, which played into her own self-narrative and self-image as a pious and charitable woman.[44]

According to Benj Pasek, "This Is Me" was written to represent "the Oddities' struggle, and claiming their identities and finding pride in your strangeness." However, Pasek—like the film in general—confuses difference (i.e., strangeness) with diversity. He notes that the song speaks to "anyone who's sort of ever felt that they weren't good enough, or they were not loveable, or they felt that they were broken, or they felt they did not deserve to be loved, it's a song that really is about declaring that you are lovable not despite of your flaws but because of your flaws."[45] Pasek and Paul were thrilled that the song took on a life of its own as an uplifting anthem for people looking for acceptance.

The crux of the film involves an act of mercy and forgiveness on the part of Barnum's human oddities, the people he has hurt the most. Barnum has hit bottom; he sits at a bar and is visited by Stratton, who is followed by Leta and the other oddities. Leta exclaims, "Our own mothers were ashamed of us. . . . Then you pull us out of the shadows. . . . You gave us a real family." They need him as much as he needs them. At this point in the film, Barnum runs to reunite with Charity. He sings another ballad, "From Now On," during which he looks toward his future. The minor-key melody has a folksy quality. Those in his entourage join in and perform another synchronized dance. Toward the end of the film, outside of the smoking ruins of the museum, Leta, Stratton, and the others reaffirm their support of Barnum. Their compassion puts Barnum into the role of supplicant. During the final moment of the film, he rides bareback upon the large elephant (Jumbo by any other name) to meet Charity and his daughters at the ballet. The film ultimately upholds the importance of family.

As already observed, *The Greatest Showman* demotes Charles Stratton (aka General Tom Thumb) and relegates him to being just one among many members of Barnum's troupe of human curiosities. As in real life, Lind and Stratton represent the democratic nature of American popular entertainment during the nineteenth century. When Barnum entered the entertainment business, high and low culture had not yet carved distinct places for themselves in American society. In the nineteenth century, highbrow and lowbrow existed comfortably side by side.[46] Society was still sorting out class, race, religion, and gender. Eventually, the freak show wound up at the low end of the continuum of American culture, but much later, during the transformation from the Victorian era to modernity. However, the contemporary film audience for Barnum biopics innately understands the class tensions inherent in the contrast between Lind's high art and Stratton's low art. That Barnum himself works to isolate Lind from Stratton and the other freaks underscores the problematic nature of the portrayal of Barnum as a hero.

Today's movie musical is very different from the Golden Age Hollywood musical. It is defined by a dynamic set of social and cultural transactions. The "new musical" has a close relationship with the popular music industry.[47] *The Greatest Showman* has deep roots in the internet, reality television, Disney's HSM series, and social media. The music is by young writers and designed for young audiences. New musicals are more transactional (with their audience). Notably, the music is not well integrated into the narrative, but this feature actually accounts for part of the new film musical aesthetic. Like the music of many recent stage musicals, the score of *The Greatest Showman* evokes a pop-rock concert that is interrupted for plot advancement. In the "new musical," the story is woven around a series of songs rather than the other way around. Music is ubiquitous, but it has also lost some of its narrative purpose and power. The most recent successful film and stage musicals are mash-ups of popular musical styles with easily identifiable emotional tropes (e.g., feeling rejected by a lover). The songs are made to be downloaded to an MP3 player.

The young demographic for *The Greatest Showman* was predisposed to embracing its two most outstanding elements: liberal identity politics and the postmodern and highly mediated pop-rock musical. Indeed, *The Greatest Showman* contains several popular features of what can be called the "new musical": pop-rock score having little to do with the time and place of the story, highly emotional songs, beautiful actors and singers, synchronized dancing, high production values, and a feel-good message. Biopics have made an enormous impact on the musical genre in general, and along with jukebox musicals, of which they are a subset, have changed the sound and look of the new musicals. The film's hip-hop energy, flashy pop music, and flimflam political posture help to hype the film's celebration of diversity.

Paul and Pasek's score consists of unrelated songs in a pop-rock style. The musical style does not invoke a sense of time or place or reflect a circus milieu. Words like "dreams," "colors," and "visions" are as ubiquitous as the images of rooftops, skylines, and starry nights in the film's backdrops. The aesthetic is more global than traditional Broadway musical theater. Common aspects of the new musical include: a target audience raised on music videos and thus accustomed to song and dance used to express generalized emotions; reliance on new digital technologies; multiple viewings by fans; and a score highly suitable for a commercially popular album. The stories, music, and themes of new musicals directly reflect interests that young people have developed outside the realm of musical theater. The audience's emotional response to these features is essential—all the more so considering that young male audiences are not predisposed to attending a musical.[48] As Steven Cohan reminds us, "historically [the musical theater genre] has thrived on forging its connection with young audiences thorough popular music."[49] The very notion of what constitutes a musical today has been challenged. Film musicals cover such a diversity of forms that even works without a diegetic musical world might qualify. Furthermore, one must add technology to the mix, especially technology unique to the film industry. The singing often derives from a place or a person not seen on screen, and overdubbing, of course, redefines the notion of a musical theater star.

As young songwriters belonging to the same generation as the film's target audience, Justin Paul and Benj Pasek were ideal for the film's aesthetic as envisioned by the director Michael Gracey and Hugh Jackman. They bought into the false but visionary narrative about Barnum spun by Jackman and Gracey. Paul explains that they are attracted "to stories of redemption, stories of hope and optimism in the face of odds, stories of second chances. . . . Maybe it's a little bit corny, but that's the way we view the world or the at least the way we want to view the world. . . . We're really attracted to stories that uplift and moments where we can write music that uplifts or that even if it goes to a dark place ultimately brings us back up and sort of out of the darkest and out of the shadows." These statements recall sentiments expressed by cast members in the interviews referenced above.[50]

Pasek and Paul effectively capture the emotion of the story without writing themselves into a stylistic corner. They have a traditional musical theater background but root their "sound" in a contemporary pop-rock style. Indeed, they are leaders of a generation of musical theater writers who approach the genre from the point of view of the internet.[51] During a TEDxBroadway Talk, Pasek described a typical contemporary musical theater song (i.e., YouTube song) as an "eleven o'clock number."[52] This type of song presents a nearly complete picture of the character who sings it and builds to an emotional outpouring. One tells an entire life story. Switching from writing YouTube songs to musical theater songs was a challenge for them. It required a different approach, one that transformed a small idea, something that perhaps occurs in a split second, into a full song. The result should be a more measured and even score, one that avoids the tendency of contemporary musicals to have an overwhelming number of songs in which an emotional and musical climax is reached.

Their methodology mirrors contemporary popular music practices, particularly its music-by-committee approach. Their score is best described as a group of loosely connected songs rather than as a unified musical work. The "score" was in fact constructed by committee, with Ryan Lewis creating the rhythm track and the chant of the opening number. The songs set a general tone, thus leaving the director and camera crew considerable freedom. The music lacks specificity and emotional interiority, and as such is the ideal blank slate for today's movie makers.

## RECEPTION

Critics lambasted the film's vague liberal message about acceptance and its "celebration of humanity."[53] Niko Tavernise, like many others, denigrated the film: "The characterization, mangled plotting, and galling feel-good messaging of *The Greatest Showman* reveals its utter contempt for its audience."[54] One review in particular stands out for its insight into the film's long-term negative impact. *The Daily Beast*'s Kristen Lopez focused on the film's disservice—even harm—to people with disabilities: "For many, P. T. Barnum is the equivalent of Robert E. Lee, a colorful character who made a career exploiting and dehumanizing those with disabilities."[55] The film, Lopez points out, resorted to the unenlightened representation of disability typical of Hollywood. Commercial films and stage works about disability are invariably presented from the point of view of abled society. They rarely represent the perspective of people with disabilities and are indeed not intended for them. *The Greatest Showman* strives "to keep the audience as comfortable as possible but, to disabled people watching, these characters acknowledge the community but never create fully human people." The physical "oddities" are so undefined as be to entirely nonthreatening. "It's easier for an able-bodied audience in 2017 to watch a woman with a beard on her face or a person covered in tattoos than it is to watch someone with microcephaly." Lopez finally and astutely argues, "The group wants acceptance from society, not from the man making money off them who, in the previous scene, also humiliated them. The message falls flat because it isn't being applied to the disabled characters but to the able-bodied audience."

Despite the overwhelming drubbing from the critics, *The Greatest Showman* caught on quickly. The film opened against stiff competition during the winter holiday season and took in a mere $8.8 million in its first week. However, the increasing popularity of its soundtrack (which reached 66 on the *Billboard* album chart) turned the film into a hit. Its gross had almost doubled in the film's second week.

As already noted, the earlier dramatizations of Barnum also got as much wrong as right, but they were primarily entertainments without any political agenda. The falsehoods in *The Greatest Showman* serve a greater purpose but do greater harm to the very people it claims to celebrate. As we have seen, all the films are hagiography and present Barnum as a hero. The showman's relationship to the "freaks" is arguably the most important difference between *The Greatest Showman* and the earlier biopics and stage works about Barnum.

## Conclusion

*The Greatest Showman* virtually erases Charles Stratton from Barnum's story and turns Jenny Lind into a pop diva for today's youth. These deviations from the historical facts made it possible to reframe Barnum as a romantic protagonist. The new story involves corporeal Otherness but only in order to give Barnum a worthy cause to rally around—one that resonates with the film's target audience—and thereby appear sympathetic. Ironically, the film—like popular culture since the time of Barnum—ultimately reinforces nineteenth-century views of physical difference, even while seeming to condemn the pernicious treatment of people with extraordinary bodies.[56] Not only was P. T. Barnum historically instrumental in maintaining this view of Otherness, but the stage and film works about Barnum continue to capitalize on this view of physical difference. It is therefore intellectually perverse to remake Barnum as an advocate of the very people he exploited to achieve fame and fortune. Specious, moreover, is the defense, often given, that he provided employment for people who might otherwise have not found work.

*The Greatest Showman* replaces the actual human curiosities exhibited at Barnum's American Museum with a group of marginalized identities. These characters feel a vague sense of strangeness or exclusion. The nineteenth-century freak was the physical embodiment of strangeness. In fact, the term "strange people" was one of many euphemisms for "freaks."[57] Spectators gazed at them in order to define what normal meant. Physically stigmatized bodies became freaks when they appeared on stage in some sort of performative guise and exhibited for profit. As Garland Thomson notes, "Being a freak is not a personal matter, a physical condition that some people have. The onstage freak is something else off stage." In *The Greatest Showman*, Barnum's circus attractions are told that their strangeness makes them special. Ironically, "freak," according to Rachael Adams, "is a concept that refuses the logic of identity politics, and the irreconcilable problems of inclusion and exclusion that necessarily accompany identitarian categories."[58] *The Greatest Showman* embraces anyone who feels strange, including those people who deliberately cultivate strangeness (such as "synthetic freaks"). After all, self-enfreakment has its liberal chic associations in the twentieth century. Appearing and acting different bestowed a sense of entitlement and specialness. This view confuses difference (i.e., strangeness) with Otherness based on physical anomaly. There is room under the big top of Hugh Jackman's Barnum for any and all people who identify with this watered-down, ahistorical definition of "freak." They desire what this version of Barnum offers: diversity and acceptance. Whereas the American Museum was a place where Barnum exhibited physical deviance, in the film it is a home for anyone who feels marginalized. This reinterpretation of enfreakment ignores the discriminatory treatment of freaks during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By using Tom Thumb as a token representation of all physical difference and by equating physical difference with all marginalized identities, the film negates the logic of diversity ideology, which views all identities as being equal. The film reflects the tendency of diversity politics to repress "forms of difference that are not included under the better-known categories of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality."[59] The film embraces diversity in general, but in doing so it ends up marginalizing the one identity that was in actual fact associated with Barnum. As freaks, the type of people who performed for Barnum prefigure disabled people who were later isolated from mainstream society and subjected to discrimination.

## NOTES

1. The composer Douglas Moore (1893–1969) composed a programmatic symphonic work about Barnum's career (*Pageant of P. T. Barnum,* Mercury, 434 319-2). In the twentieth century, Barnum was the subject of three biopics and two Broadway plays, as well as a major character in Jules Verne's film *Rocket to the Moon*, in which he is played by the avuncular Earl Ives. Barnum also figures in several historical fiction novels. Scholarly literature on Barnum ranges from critiques of his influence on popular culture to examinations of how his career intersected with race. See, e.g., Benjamin Reiss, "P. T. Barnum, Joice Heth, and Antebellum Spectacles of Race," *American Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1999): 78–107.
2. David A. Gerber, "The 'Careers' of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorization," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 38–54.
3. The earliest biography is Joel Benton's *A Unique Story of a Marvellous Career: Life of Hon. Phineas T. Barnum* (New York: Union Publishing House, 1891). The most recent is Robert Wilson's *Barnum: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019).
4. Barnum's first autobiography was *The Life of P. T. Barnum* (London: Sampson Low, Son and Co., 1855), which he wrote early in his career.
5. Karen J. Renner, "Caveat Emptor, Economic Contrapasso, and *The Life of P. T. Barnum*," unpublished essay.
6. Wilson, *Barnum*, 7.

7. Rachael Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), 6.
8. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, "Introduction: From Wonder to Error—A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity," in *Freakery*, 1–19.
9. Leonard Cassuto, "Freak," in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, ed. Rachael Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 85.
10. Lori Merish, "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple," in *Freakery*, 185–203.
11. Eric D. Lehman, *Becoming Tom Thumb: Charles Stratton, P. T. Barnum, and the Dawn of American Celebrity* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), ix.
12. Lehman, *Becoming Tom Thumb*, xviii.
13. Lehman, *Becoming Tom Thumb*, 13.
14. Francis Rogers, "Jenny Lind," *Musical Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (1946): 439.
15. Francesca Vella, "Jenny Lind, Voice, Celebrity," *Music and Letters* 98, no. 2 (2017): 232–254.
16. Rogers, "Jenny Lind," 442.
17. "Hugh Jackman Dumbs Down P. T. Barnum in Musical Bio," https://www.mlive.com/movies/2017/12/the_greatest_showman_review_hu.html, accessed December 16, 2019.
18. Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 9.
19. Lennard J. Davis, "Diversity," in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, 61.
20. Alva Johnson adopted the labels "authentic freaks" and "synthetic freaks" to distinguish between people with an unusual congenital physical condition ("an anomaly of nature") and people with an outstanding physical difference resulting from self-mutilation or a self-inflicted bodily change. See Sheila M. Rothman and David J. Rothman, *The Pursuit of Perfection: The Promise and Perils of Medical Enhancement* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 16.
21. Frederick Drimmer, *Very Special People: The Struggles, Loves, and Triumphs of Human Oddities* (New York: Amjon Publishers, 1973), 41.
22. *The Greatest Showman*, Special Features, Blu-ray disc, directed by Michael Gracey (2017; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century–Fox Home Entertainment, 2018).
23. See, e.g., Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 89–90.
24. Michael Ordoña, "Zac Efron and Zendaya Bring Romance, and a Standout Duet, to 'The Greatest Showman,'" *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 2017, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-zac-efron-zendaya-greatest-showman-20171219-story.html.
25. Gerald Bordman, *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1914–1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 87.
26. *The Literary Digest* 59, no. 2 (October 12, 1918): 25–27.
27. Andre Sennwald, "Wallace Beery and 'The Mighty Barnum, at the Rivoli,'" *New York Times*, December 24, 1934.
28. This movie was part of A&E "Biography."
29. Andre Sennwald, "Wallace Beery and 'The Mighty Barnum, at the Rivoli,'" *New York Times*, December 24, 1934; and Laura Fries, "P. T. Barnum," *Variety*, September 10, 1999.
30. *Barnum* featured a book by Mark Bramble, lyrics by Michael Stewart, and music by Cy Coleman. Just a year earlier, Barnum appeared as a character in another stage work, Joan Schenkar's 1979 feminist play *Signs of Life*, which imagines a meeting between Barnum and Henry James and explores women empowerment.

31. Douglass Watt, "'Barnum' Humdinger Story of a Humbug," *Daily News*, May 1, 1980.
32. Tish Dace, "P. T. Hokum," *Soho Weekly*, May 7, 1980.
33. George and Olive first appeared together in Johnny Jones Exposition and then in Buster Shaver's vaudeville act. Notably, George and Olive turned down an offer to appear in *The Wizard of Oz* because their live stage act was more lucrative.
34. Drimmer, *Very Special People*, 211–217.
35. "Sam Humphrey Goes to Hollywood," September 30, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ke7_Dkfdoc8&t=1062s; and McKenzie Morrell, "'Greatest Showman' Star Sam Humphrey Talks Working with Hugh Jackman," *Fan Fest News*, March 9, 2018, http://fanfest.com/greatest-showman-star-sam-humphrey-talks-working-with-hugh-jackman-and-following-his-dreams/.
36. Alexis Carey, "Rare Disease Hasn't Stopped Aussie Actor Sam Humphrey from Starring Alongside Hero Hugh Jackman, *news.com.au*, December 30, 2017, https://www.news.com.au/entertainment/movies/new-movies/rare-disease-hasnt-stopped-aussie-actor-sam-humphrey-from-starring-alongside-hero-hugh-jackman/news-story/6ad0fc34482528f80a4399733a25ef17.
37. Manuel Herrero-Puertas, "Freak Bodies Politic: Charles Stratton, *Dred*, and the Embodiment of National Innocence," *American Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (2015): 1137.
38. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 12.
39. John C. Tibbetts, *Composers in the Movies*, Studies in Musical Biography (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 7.
40. An affair between Barnum and Lind was rumored at the time of her American tour. When Lind asked Barnum how rumors that they were to be married started, he responded, "Probably from the fact that we are 'engaged,'" referring to their professional dealings. See Wilson, *Barnum*, 151.
41. Rogers, "Jenny Lind," 447.
42. Rebecca Ferguson's voice is dubbed by Loren Allred. The singer oscillates between a strong belt and weak head voice, creating the yodel effect common in female pop singing. She (i.e., Allred) models her vocal style on Celine Dion.
43. Settle's career has been building, and she typically lands roles for full-bodied woman, such as Tracy Turnblad in *Hairspray* and Mrs. Fezziwig in *A Christmas Carol*. Settle's vocal specialty is a type of R&B (her true roots), which she uses in the film.
44. Rogers, "Jenny Lind," 439.
45. "Meet Oscar Nominees Benji Pasek & Justin Paul of 'The Greatest Showman,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 2, 2018, https:/www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GCiWbFYcJg.
46. Lehman, *Becoming Tom Thumb*, xv.
47. Barry Keith Grant, *The Hollywood Film Musical* (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 4.
48. David Rooney and Jonathan Bing, "Can Hollywood Carry a Tune?: Despite Success of 'Chicago,' Studios Still Leery of Musicals," *Variety*, March 10–16, 2003, 1, 51; and Steven Cohan, "Introduction: How Do You Solve a Problem Like the Film Musical?," in *The Sound of Musicals*, ed. Steven Cohan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 1–18.
49. Cohan, "Introduction," 11.
50. See Special Features included on the Blu-ray (2018).
51. "Art, Artists and the Age of YouTube Composers: Benj Pasek & Justin Paul," April 20, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xw4HoZRWVxs.

52. "Art, Artists and the Age of YouTube Composers."
53. Niko Tavernise, "Awful Barnum Musical[:] The Greatest Showman Proves There's a Sucker Born Every Minute," https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/film-reviews/review-barnum-musical-the-greatest-showman-proves-theres-a-sucker-born-every-minute/article37383295/, accessed September 23, 2019.
54. Tavernise, "Awful Barnum Musical."
55. Kristen Lopez, "'The Greatest Showman' Fails Disabled Audiences by Masking P. T. Barnum's Monstrous Past," *Daily Beat*, https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-greatest-showman-fails-disabled-audiences-by-masking-pt-barnums-monstrous-past, accessed December 22, 2017.
56. Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 5.
57. Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), 6.
58. Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.*, 10.
59. Davis, "Diversity," 62.

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